Life in the Lanes

Documenting Chennai

Images and Insights



Colin Todhunter

Mint Street Press

Life in the Lanes

Documenting Chennai

Images and Insights



Madras University (2023)

About the Author

Colin Todhunter is an independent researcher and writer and has spent many years in India. He is a research associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (Montreal) and usually writes on food, agriculture and development issues. In 2018, in recognition of his writing, he was named a Living Peace and Justice Leader and Model by Engaging Peace Inc.

Published by Mint Street Press, Chennai

Life in the Lanes: Documenting Chennai © 2024 by Colin Todhunter is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International. To view a copy of this licence, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

This licence requires that reusers give credit to the creator. It allows reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form and for non-commercial purposes only.

BY: Credit must be given to the creator. NC: Only non-commercial use is permitted. This means not primarily intended for or directed towards commercial advantage or monetary compensation. ND: No derivatives or adaptations are permitted.

This licence notice implies that people should be mindful of cultural sensitivities when using or discussing the images. Different licensing options were available. This one was chosen as it underlines a commitment to education and cultural understanding while respecting privacy as much as possible.

This book begins with a preface, outlining the motivations for the project, followed by an introduction that discusses the themes and issues highlighted. The images are then presented.

Preface

There is considerable debate surrounding globalisation and social change in India. For instance, how do changes affect the daily lives of ordinary people, and how do ordinary people in urban India navigate their personal identities amid the tensions between modernity and tradition and community and individualism in a rapidly evolving landscape?

This non-academic, (hopefully) educational, image-based ebook is aimed at the general reader, who is invited to reflect on these questions and how the forces of globalisation shape and are shaped by the lived experiences of people.

I first visited India in the mid-1990s and have since spent many years in the country. I was introduced to Chennai (formerly Madras) in 1997, and it has long been my favourite city in India.

Although Chennai is now a sprawling metropolis of more than 11 million people, George Town, which lies adjacent to the port, is still considered by many to be the heart of the city.

Sowcarpet forms part of the George Town area and is the city's most vibrant and certainly the most culturally diverse district. Many people from North India, particularly Rajasthan and Gujarat, have settled there. Sowcarpet is often called 'little North India' due to the large migrant population that has made the area home.

Most of the following 90 images were taken in Sowcarpet and the wider George Town area but also include shots from the Triplicane, Thousand Lights and Royapetta areas of Chennai.

Simple screenshots from hours of unobtrusive video taken with a cheap handheld Samsung phone between 2022 and 2024.

I had felt drawn to Chennai and especially Sowcarpet for a long time and wanted to try to capture its essence through video and, subsequently, in this ebook, screenshots. I spent two years, on and off, being in and around Sowcarpet, walking around the area in the heat, humidity and congestion for days and months on end.

It was just a personal mission that I had felt compelled to do. There was never any intention to place the images in the public domain. That only began to cross my mind a few months after I had left the area.

Most of the images are accompanied by commentaries that indicate their cultural and social significance. Each commentary could be expanded to form entire books in themselves. In fact, there is a wealth of academic literature available providing in-depth insights into the interplay between identity, modernity, secularism, the sacred and tradition in India.

But the aim was to keep things brief. This is not intended as a treatise or scholarly work. The images are the focal point, and I am very much an outsider looking in. In this respect, it could intrigue readers from various countries, appealing more to a wider audience beyond just Indian perspectives.

I possess no formal training in photography or high-end equipment but have managed to capture something that may have some value. By no means slick and glossy, the images still provide an authentic, intimate glimpse into daily life.

Street photography freezes microseconds of time, preserving fleeting moments and, in this case, with an immediacy that more intrusive camera equipment might fail to achieve. Regardless of

their lower quality (a cheap handheld phone with the subjects and the camera often moving), the images are raw and serendipitous, presenting life as it unfolds naturally on the streets.

My inspiration partly stems from historical photographs of Britain, which serve as poignant time capsules of vanished ways of life. These images document entire communities and industrial landscapes in the 1950s and 1960s that were swept away within a couple of decades by the relentless march of 'progress'. Photographs that connect us to a past where people's sense of identity was intimately tied to their surroundings.

In Chennai, especially in Sowcarpet, custom and tradition and regional and personal identity are deeply intertwined, creating an eclectic mix that has largely withstood the test of time. What is presented in this ebook stands as a testament to the enduring power of cultural identity.

However, even here, the forces of modernity or globalisation — more accurately characterised as neocolonialism, considering the underlying processes — are gradually reshaping the urban landscape and influencing the lives, fashions and tastes of its inhabitants.

Introduction

This introduction sets the scene for the images presented in this book, and many of the commentaries that accompany the images reflect or restate the themes and issues laid out here.

The working poor feature in some of the images. Engaged in diverse occupations, such as construction, goods transport, waste recycling, domestic service and street vending, their contributions are vital for the functioning of the economy.

Informal workers constitute more than 90 per cent of the labour force (80 per cent in urban settings). However, the informal sector is characterised by challenging working conditions that include strenuous manual labour, low remuneration, extended hours and a lack of workplace benefits.

This stark reality of the informal sector stands in direct contrast to the expansive cyber parks and modern shopping malls that epitomise India's uneven 'development' — a concept that suggests modernisation often occurs in isolated sectors, leaving substantial portions of the population relatively untouched.

This is particularly evident in the retail landscape, where traditional and modern forms of commerce coexist, often in uneasy tension. On one hand, there is a concerning proliferation of organised retail and (monopolistic) online commerce platforms, representing one aspect of Indian consumerism. On the other hand, local street markets and vendors — integral components of the informal sector — remain a longstanding and vital feature of Indian urban life.

Despite the encroachment of modern retail, these traditional markets continue to thrive, facilitating a direct connection between rural producers and urban consumers, particularly concerning fresh produce.

This farm-to-table model not only sustains millions of livelihoods within the informal sector, but it is also deeply embedded in Indian culinary culture, highlighting the ongoing relevance of these markets within urban neighbourhoods.

The persistence of such traditional forms of commerce alongside modern retail outlets highlights the interplay between tradition and modernity in India's urban economic landscape.

Culturally, India presents a distinctive scenario. As the images presented show, unlike many Western contexts where religion is often compartmentalised, spiritual practices and symbols are intricately interwoven into public life. The integration of sacred and secular elements persists despite the influences of modernity, urbanisation and global consumerism.

While societal structures may evolve externally, fundamental cultural and spiritual values remain deeply entrenched. Indian urbanism allows for the coexistence of age-old practices with contemporary realities.

For instance, religious symbols serve as markers of cultural identity. The portrayal of Hindu deities on everyday items reinforces cultural connections even within modern contexts. Such representations often feature vibrant artistic styles that blend functionality with cultural significance.

Moreover, paraphernalia — such as leaves, limes or conch shells — are commonly used to adorn small businesses. Each leaf possesses distinct symbolic meanings; conch shells are associated with Vishnu and are frequently displayed outside stores. Limes, often paired with green chilies to ward off negative energies, symbolise prosperity and abundance, making them prevalent, hanging in front of shops. This practice illustrates the enduring influence of tradition on contemporary commerce in India.

Furthermore, deeply rooted beliefs associated with concepts like dharma persist despite social transformations. Many dharmic traditions emphasise the significance of seva (selfless service), with charitable giving — known as dana in Sanskrit — considered an essential aspect of one's dharma or religious duty. This practice is perceived not merely as a moral obligation but as a spiritual endeavour that fosters personal growth and good karma. This may, in part, help us to understand why 'duty' or 'service' is often invoked when people talk about their jobs.

As mentioned in the preface, old photographs of Britain evoke memories of cohesive communities and industrial landscapes that were rapidly swept away within a generation. This was done in the name of 'progress'.

The consequences have been critically examined by writer Paul Kingsnorth in his book *Real England: The Battle Against the Bland*. He laments the loss of authentic pubs, rural hedgerows, affordable housing, individuality and character in towns due to corporate greed and an insatiable quest for profit — a phenomenon described by one insightful reviewer as a "Starbucked, Wetherspooned avalanche".

The following images celebrate the vibrancy of Chennai's streets while also preserving a visual record of a way of life that may transform in the coming years under the banner of 'progress'.

With that in mind, I am reminded of what the British journalist David Charters (1948-2020) wrote in 2003:

"Sadly, the world is being shrunk to a 'global village' by the forces of celebrity, mass media, instant communications, swift travel and the constant desire for standardisation. So, we should record the qualities that made us different, while there is still time."

Hard Labour in Sowcarpet (2023)

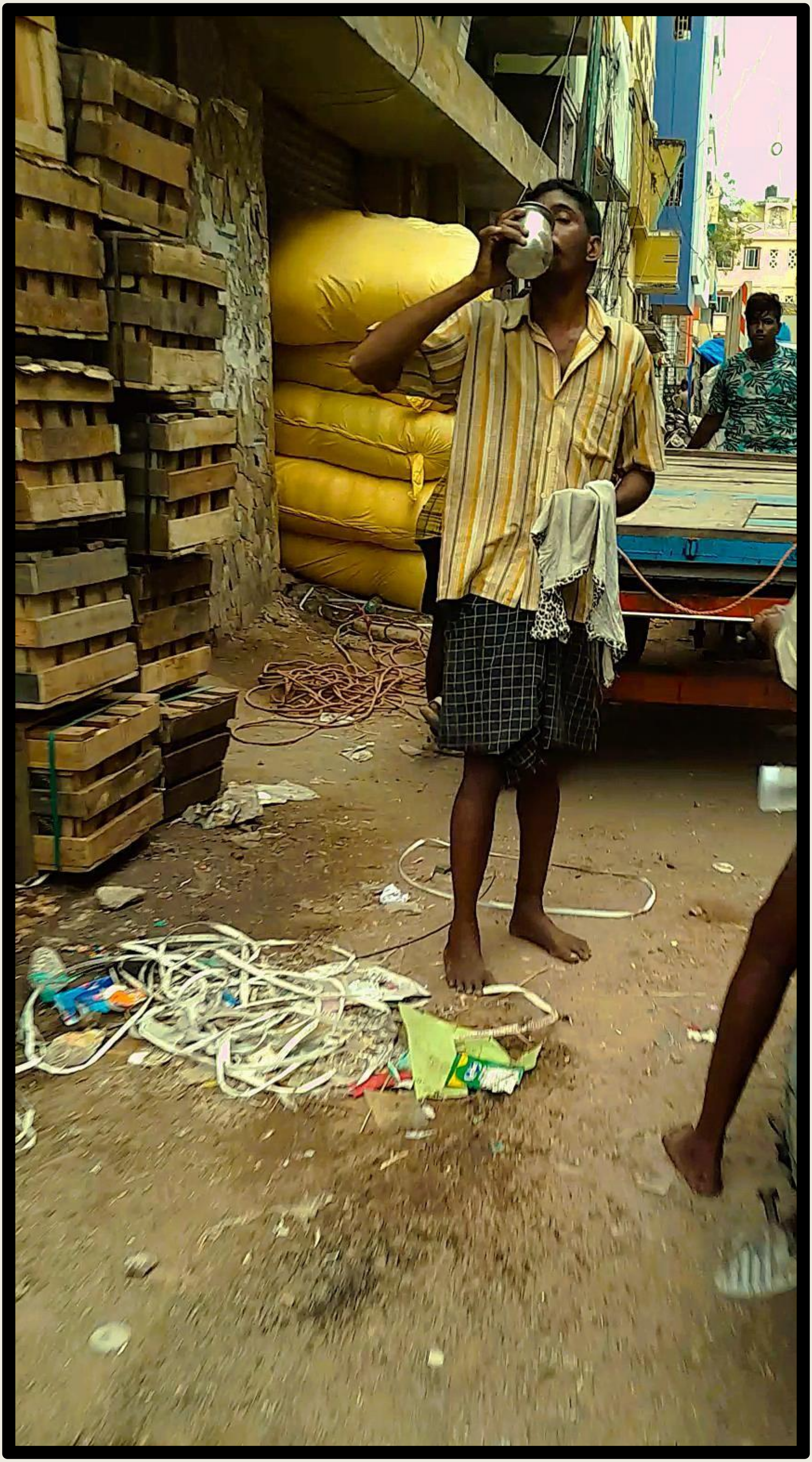
The worker's attire and bare feet contrast with an urban setting that includes cyber parks and gleaming shopping malls and illustrate the concept of uneven ‘development’. This theory posits that modernisation often occurs in pockets, leaving significant portions of the population relatively untouched.

The manual labourer's presence in this environment highlights the persistence of traditional labour forms alongside high-tech industries, reflecting the complex socioeconomic landscape of modern India. The metal mug from which the worker drinks water (an old-style drinking vessel) and the lungi wrapped around his lower part symbolise the continuity of tradition in daily life. This simple act of refreshment during a work break represents a moment of respite in the gruelling routine of manual labour, underscoring the physical demands of such work in a country where technological advancement is rife.

The hand-pulled cart, sacks of produce and wooden pallets surrounding the worker paint a picture of India’s huge informal economy and traditional practices that continue to thrive in urban India. These elements stand in stark contrast to the image of India as a burgeoning tech hub, highlighting the coexistence of multiple economic realities within the same urban space.

The image also speaks to issues of social stratification and labour rights in India. The worker's visible exhaustion and the demanding nature of his work raise questions about labour conditions and the distribution of economic benefits in a highly unequal society.

This is something we will return to in other images that shed brief insights into the lives of the working poor.



Devotion in Triplicane (2023)

This image captures a compelling intersection of religious devotion and everyday life in Chennai.

Triplicane is a historically significant neighbourhood that holds great importance for both Hindus and Muslims. The area is home to the ancient Parthasarathy Temple, one of the oldest temples in Chennai, while Wallajah Mosque, one of the largest and oldest in Chennai, is a major centre for Islamic worship and community gatherings.

The man's forehead marking, a tilak, associated with Vishnu, serves as a visible symbol of his religious identity and devotion amid the bustling nighttime cityscape.

The presence of this marking illustrates how religious practices are seamlessly integrated into daily life, even in secular spaces. The devout individual highlights the connection between tradition and modernity in India today. It indicates how ancient religious practices continue to thrive alongside the pressures and rhythms of urban life.

Unlike in some Western contexts where religion is often compartmentalised, in India, spiritual practices and symbols frequently permeate public spaces. This man's visible devotion, even outside a mundane setting like a restaurant, reflects the seamless integration of the sacred and the secular in Indian cultural life.

While the external trappings of society may evolve, core cultural and spiritual values often remain deeply rooted, something which we will return to.


XEROX

Devotion on Mint Street (2023)

She is standing as part of a group of women with children, who are most likely members of her extended family. The red colour worn by the woman is deeply significant in Hindu culture, representing auspiciousness, fertility and feminine power and is linked to the goddess Durga.

The setting of pavement-less Mint Street in Sowcarpet, a historically mercantile district, enhances the scene's contrast between a harsh urban setting of noise, traffic congestion and crowds and the intimate act of nurturing a child who seems vulnerable amid the chaos.

The busy street is home to numerous Hindu shrines and temples, reinforcing the cultural backdrop against which personal and communal identities are negotiated. The woman's attire — a traditional saree paired with contemporary accessories like a fashionable handbag and modern watch — illustrates the negotiation of personal identity in today's India.

This blend signifies a dynamic interface between old and new, showcasing how individuals create their personal narratives while maintaining ties to their heritage.

In Hinduism, nurturing children is often equated with divine service, linking everyday acts of care to spiritual practice. This connection emphasises that motherhood transcends mere biological functions; it embodies a sacred duty that aligns with broader religious beliefs.

This scene encapsulates a multifaceted representation of Indian culture where colour symbolism, urban dynamics, personal identity and devotion converge.



Poor in Triplicane (2024)

This image captures a moment of religious grandeur and, as with the previous image, human vulnerability in the heart of Chennai.

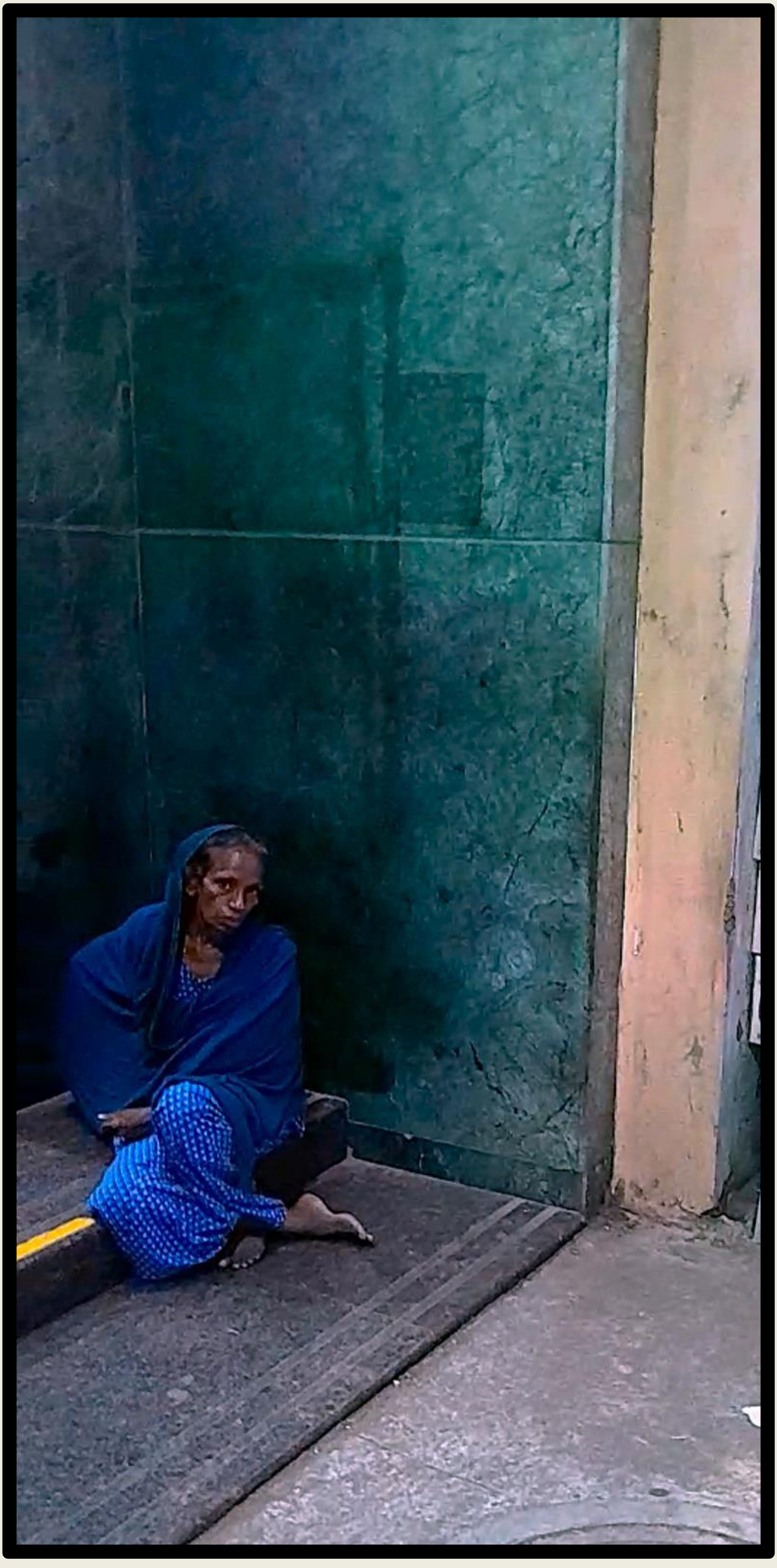
The vast entrance of the mosque in Triplicane hints of the architectural and spiritual magnificence of Islam in India. The poor woman sitting at the entrance, a tiny figure dwarfed by the mosque's grandeur, embodies the realities of today's India.

Her presence here, seeking alms, reflects the enduring tradition of charity (zakat) in Islam, which encourages believers to support those in need. This scene illustrates how religious institutions serve as informal social safety nets where formal welfare systems may be inadequate.

The contrast between the mosque's splendour and the woman's poverty highlights the stark economic disparities that persist in cities like Chennai. A visual metaphor for the challenges of reconciling religious ideals with socioeconomic realities.

The woman's position at the threshold of the mosque symbolises her liminal status: physically close to a centre of spiritual and community life yet marginalised by economic circumstances.

The ancient practice of seeking alms at religious sites continues against the backdrop of a city known for its rapid modernisation and growing IT sector. The nature of Indian urbanism sees age-old practices coexist with modern realities. This image indicates the intersection of religion, poverty and life in contemporary India.



Changing Times in Triplicane (2024)

Inside a small family-run pharmacy. The elderly married couple represent a generation of pharmacists who have witnessed significant changes in their profession and, more generally, during their lifetime.

Their comfort in a familiar space adorned with framed images of Hindu deities reflects the deep-rooted cultural and religious traditions that continue to play a vital role in Indian businesses.

These images serve not only as decoration but also as a form of spiritual protection and blessing for the establishment, highlighting the seamless integration of faith into daily commercial activities.

The presence of the latest technology — the computer screen and cell phone — indicates the couple's engagement with these devices, despite appearing slightly out of place in an old-fashioned room of Formica and wood.

These family-run establishments have long been pillars of their communities, offering personalised service and often serving as informal healthcare advisors. And this one is as warm and inviting as it appears, with the couple offering a personal touch.

Their engagement with digital tools, set against the backdrop of religious imagery and a familiar, intimate space, exemplifies a nuanced negotiation between old and new.



Rag Picker on Mint Street (2024)

This image of a rag picker on Mint Street captures an intense snapshot of urban poverty and informal labour. Rag pickers, also known as waste pickers, play a crucial yet often overlooked role in India's waste management ecosystem.

The rag picker's bent posture and the massive sack he carries symbolise the physical toll of this work. These individuals, often from marginalised communities, spend long hours scouring the streets for recyclable materials like plastic bottles, cardboard and metal scraps.

Their labour, though informal, contributes significantly to recycling efforts and reduces the burden on overflowing landfills. In Chennai alone, it's estimated that more than 10,000 waste pickers, predominantly from Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Muslim communities, carry out most of the city's recycling.

The image of empty plastic bottles protruding from the sack highlights the global issue of plastic waste and the informal economy that has developed around its collection and recycling.

The rag picker's hunched form denotes the harsh realities of this work. Waste pickers face numerous challenges, including health risks from handling unsegregated waste, social stigma and lack of formal recognition.

They often work in hazardous conditions, exposed to air pollution and toxic materials, with little to no protective gear.



Happiness on Mint Street (2024)

This image of a smiling member of the hijra (third gender) community on Mint Street captures a moment of visibility and human connection with a group that has long been marginalised in Indian society.

Her warm greeting and attractive appearance challenge common stereotypes and prejudices, offering a more nuanced and positive representation of this eclectic community.

Hijras have a long history in India, with roots tracing back to ancient Hindu mythology and texts. They once held respected positions in royal courts, particularly during the Mughal era. Traditionally, hijras have played important roles in certain religious and life-cycle ceremonies, believed to have the power to bless or curse.

However, British colonial rule dramatically altered their social status, criminalising and stigmatising the community through laws. Today, they often face significant discrimination and economic hardship, and many are forced into begging or sex work due to limited employment opportunities.

But this image suggests a degree of self-confidence and integration into modern life. It may reflect gradual positive changes in societal attitudes and recent legal recognitions of third gender status in India.

Hijras often adopt feminine dress and mannerisms yet occupy a unique cultural space distinct from both men and women.

This image offers a glimpse into the resilience and humanity of a special community.





A few members of the Hijra community were always together on this stretch of Mint Street


ankariya's
Specialist in :
ngles & Hair Accessories
STREET, SOWCARPET, CHENNAI - 79
NEELKANT
Seek

Asceticism on Mint Street (2022)

This image captures a striking juxtaposition of traditional asceticism and consumerism on Mint Street, offering a powerful visual metaphor for the complex interplay of spiritual and material values in Indian society.

The sadhu, dressed in traditional saffron attire, represents India's ancient spiritual traditions. Sadhus are ascetics who have renounced worldly possessions and pleasures in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Their presence in urban settings, in this case, seeking alms from businesses, connects modern city life to age-old religious customs.

This image is a visual commentary on the tensions and contradictions in Indian society. It highlights the coexistence of deep-rooted spiritual traditions with the rapid embrace of global consumer culture, particularly in cities like Chennai.

The sadhu's presence in this commercial setting demonstrates how ancient practices continue to find a place in today’s urban landscape. Furthermore, this image invites reflection on changing values and aspirations in Indian society.

The image encapsulates the intricate cultural negotiations taking place in contemporary India, where tradition and modernity, spirituality and materialism, coexist in sometimes uneasy but always dynamic ways.

It serves as a vivid reminder of the multifaceted nature of Indian culture and the ongoing process of reconciling ancient traditions with the pressures and allures of global modernity.


Fashion House
மூலம்
மூலம்

Bottle Shop on Wall Tax Road (2023)

This image outside a government-run liquor shop captures a complex aspect of Tamil Nadu's relationship with alcohol. The scene reflects the state's unique approach to alcohol regulation and distribution. The caged structure of the shop, with only a small opening for transactions, is a distinctive feature of Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC) outlets. Established in 1983, TASMAC holds a monopoly on alcohol retail in the state.

This design serves multiple purposes: it controls crowds, prevents theft and symbolically reinforces the state's ambivalent stance towards alcohol, providing access while simultaneously stigmatising its consumption.

For many low-income men, these shops represent one of the few affordable sources of recreation and stress relief. However, this accessibility has also been linked to social issues such as domestic violence and poverty, fueling ongoing debates about prohibition and regulation.

The young man's apparent happiness contrasts sharply with the austere setting, reinforced by the fact the shop is on Wall Tax Road, a gritty, traffic-polluted and somewhat ugly thoroughfare. No doubt his joy is underpinned by a degree of escapism from his harsh reality.

While traditional values and political movements have often advocated for abstinence, alcohol consumption remains widespread and is often associated with masculinity and social bonding, particularly among lower-income groups.

With that in mind, “Beer makes you strong” is something I have been told on many occasions in India.



Open House in George Town (2023)

This image of belongings left in a public space (the street) in the city’s George Town area offers a poignant glimpse into the lives of the urban poor and their relationship with the city's shared spaces.

The collection of items represents the basic necessities of daily life for those living on the margins of society. These possessions, though modest, indicate that the owners are not transient but have established a semi-permanent presence.

The use of public space for private living is a common phenomenon in many Indian cities, particularly in areas like George Town, which has a long history of commerce and harsh manual labour.

This image highlights the blurred boundaries between public and private spheres for those without formal housing. It speaks to the resourcefulness and resilience of the poor, who create makeshift homes in whatever spaces are available to them.

The people who live here are likely engaged in the informal economy, possibly as day labourers or street vendors in this bustling area. This underscores the vital role that such workers play in the economy.

While these individuals have carved out a living space for themselves, their presence in public areas often leads to conflicts with authorities and other citizens over the use and appearance of shared urban environments.

There are plans to relocate the hundreds of street dwellers in George Town to housing in an area many kilometres away. This is a problem as, like in many cities, the homeless are reluctant to move given that their entire lives and work activities are rooted in the neighbourhoods they reside in and are part of.


உறுப்பினர்கள்: சு.சக்திவேல் கே.லோகநாதன்



Triplicane (2024). She has been living on this stretch of pavement since I first met her in 1997. She earns some money from cleaning.



Mobile on Mint Street (2023)

I caught a glimpse of this scene when the crowds had cleared from this particular spot. It immediately struck me that there was something else going on here aside from a snapshot of tradition meets modernity. There was also a blurring of lines between human and artificial representations.

The woman, adorned with a bindi and sindoor on her forehead, beautifully represents traditional Indian femininity and marital status. These elements are deeply rooted in Hindu culture and continue to be significant markers of identity for many Indian women. However, the cell phone she holds is a clear symbol of modern technology and connectivity that transcends time and place.

Women in India today navigate their identities by embracing both their cultural heritage and the conveniences offered by technology.

The presence of the mannequins wearing sarees next to the woman creates a striking visual parallel. The similarity in complexion, tone and smooth skin evokes a sense of uncanny resemblance, reminiscent of AI robots or digital representations.

This image offers a commentary on the coexistence of tradition and modernity and the influence of technology and consumerism on self-presentation and the evolving nature of urban identity in areas like Sowcarpet, which have long been melting pots of different cultures and commercial exchange.



Coconut Coir in Sowcarpert (2023)

This image of a man pulling a cycle cart stacked high with neatly bundled coir through the streets captures a vivid snapshot of traditional commerce and labour practices that persist in India. Coir, derived from coconut husks, holds significant cultural and economic importance in South India, particularly in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Its presence in Sowcarpet, known for its wholesale markets, illustrates the enduring connections between rural production and urban distribution centres, showcasing how traditional products continue to flow into bustling city environments.

The act of pulling a heavily loaded cart highlights the persistence of manual labour in India's urban economies. The image serves as a reminder that while some areas of the city embrace technological advancements, others remain reliant on labour-intensive methods that have been part of the fabric of Indian society for generations.

Moreover, this transport method is emblematic of the vast informal economy in India. Workers like the man in the image often operate without formal contracts or social security, playing a crucial role in supply chains while remaining largely invisible in official economic statistics.

This image encapsulates the resilience and adaptability of workers in the informal sector who find ways to navigate congested urban spaces and meet market demands. The sight of coir being transported through Sowcarpet not only reflects economic activity but also cultural continuity.


LUCKY HARDWARES

Sacred and Secular in Sowcarpet (2024)

Sowcarpet is home to many wholesalers selling agricultural produce. In India, the incorporation of Hindu deities into everyday items, as on these sacks of rice, reflects the deep integration of religion and spirituality in daily life. This practice stems from the belief that the divine is present in all aspects of life.

Many Hindu deities represent specific virtues or qualities. For example, Ganesha is often seen on doorways or vehicles, symbolising the removal of obstacles and new beginnings. Lakshmi, frequently depicted in shops, represents wealth and prosperity. By including these deities on relevant items, people invoke their blessings in daily activities.

In India, religious symbols can act as markers of cultural identity. Featuring Hindu deities on everyday items reinforces cultural connections and traditions, even in modern contexts.

Additionally, these deities are often depicted in vibrant, intricate artistic styles that add aesthetic value to everyday objects, blending functionality with cultural artistry. Hinduism bridges the gap between the sacred and the mundane in a uniquely Indian way.

Symbolism and artistry aside, rice and wheat, which meet more than half of the daily energy requirements of people in India, have lost up to 45 per cent of their micronutrient content in the past 50 years or so due to the types of modern seeds (which replaced indigenous ones) now being used and soil degradation. Not everything ‘modern’ or associated with modernisation is beneficial. Far from it.



NO.1 PREMIUM PONNI BOILED RICE
Lighthouse
BRAND
Premium Grade Rice
SORTEX
Finest Export Quality
414/13
A Classic Masterpiece
Eeyarakai
Star Sivaji
SLM
GOLD
Sona Premium Rice


CEMENT



Building Supplies and Hotel Reception on Wall Tax Road

Food for Thought in George Town (2024)

India has achieved self-sufficiency in food grains and has ensured there is enough food (in terms of calories) available to feed its entire population. It is the world's largest producer of milk, pulses and millets and the second-largest producer of rice, wheat, sugarcane, groundnuts, vegetables, fruit and cotton.

India is still an agrarian-based country with around 60 per cent of the population involved in agriculture, either directly or indirectly.

Despite this, there is an ongoing agrarian crisis marked by farmer indebtedness, high input costs, the influx of cheap imports and the withdrawal of state support. Many urban Indians take for granted the supply of food but are unaware of the crisis in the countryside and the plight of many farmers.

There is a plan to make farming financially non-viable for most farmers and drive them to the cities. Shifting hundreds of millions to urban centres is at the behest of powerful global agribusiness that seeks to amalgamate land and impose large-scale industrial agriculture on the country.

This is sold as 'modernising' agriculture. It would be wise to question what 'modernity' actually entails and who benefits.

This also involves getting India to eradicate its essential food buffer stocks and compel it to bid for food (with US dollars) on the global market. Indians are rightly proud of their food culture, but a loss of food sovereignty would have serious implications and transform the nature of food in India, not least because of the push to introduce genetically engineered food crops, which would change the genetic core of the food supply.


Bhimaas Foods
Pure Vegetarian
Idli
Rs .50
Parotta
Rs .50
Chapathi
Rs .50

Spirit of Mint Street (2023)

Wholesale markets, cycle rickshaws and tightly packed buildings. Congested streets, narrow lanes and wandering cattle. Gold jewellery shimmers in brightly lit shop windows and drips on the skin of women who sit in groups on shop floors, where men wheel out cloth from rolls for customers' inspection. Materials destined to be draped around bodies then hung over a thousand Sowcarpet balconies above the streets while drying in the sun.

People stop at stalls of apples, mangoes, aubergines and oranges for public perusal. Abundance overload on Mint Street, Sowcarpet's main thoroughfare. Perfumes, paper, plates, plastic tubing or intricate henna hand painting done in the street. Shree Ganesh Steel, Bharat Steel House and Gents Beauty Parlour. The mundane practicalities of everyday living next to adornments designed to beautify.

And people wait. The destitute wait for alms outside the area's temples. Men squat and wait for a day of shifting and loading to begin. Others wait too — men who have more than their muscle power for sale. They are artisans whose tools — trowels, hammers, chisels and various other implements — are displayed on the ground in front of them. Skills for hire. The dignity of labour.

Bells chime and semi-naked, soft-bodied temple priests brush past proud-looking men honed from granite, who have already started their day's toil of lifting and carrying. Many visit this area of the city for dried fruits, spices and grains. They come for textiles and sarees. They come for gleaming metallic kitchenware, plastic products, fashion jewellery, machine tools, electronic items, stationery and various general products at low cost.


02 888 888
SWIGGY
HONDA
TN 04
AQ 0956




Digital Cutting
17.4.

Small Retail on Mint Street (2024)

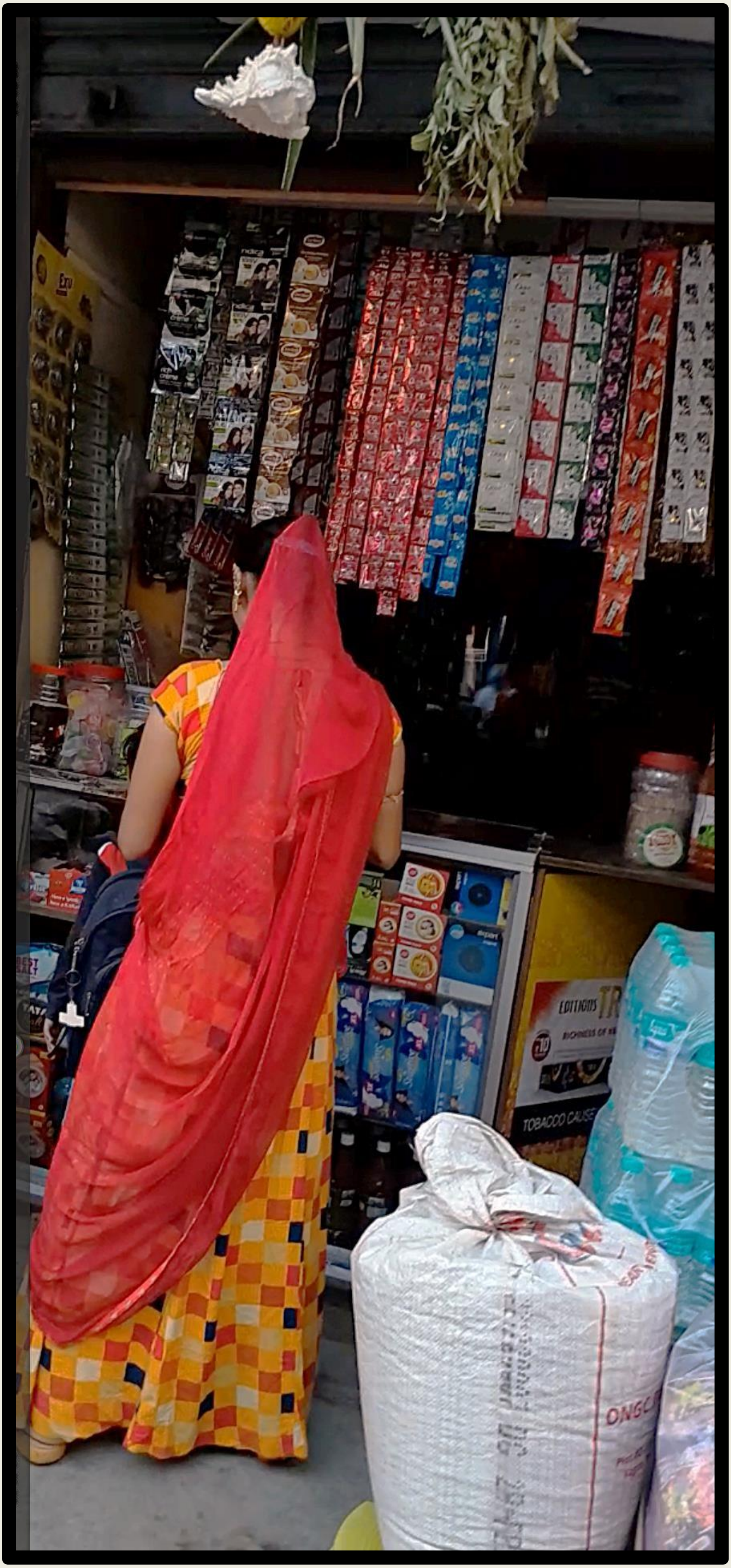
These small, one-room neighbourhood retail shops are known as kirana stores. They primarily sell groceries and essential household items, making them a staple in local communities for shoppers. Kirana stores are usually family-owned and operate with minimal overhead costs, allowing them to offer competitive prices on everyday goods like rice, spices and personal care products. This one is on Mint Street, serving a woman of North Indian ancestry.

Note the presence of the shell and leaves hanging outside. They carry deep symbolic meaning rooted in Hindu philosophy and cultural traditions. For example, in Hinduism, the conch shell is sacred and associated with Vishnu, the preserver deity. It is used in rituals and symbolises purity and prosperity.

A lime hangs above the shell. They are often accompanied by green chillis to protect against negative energies. They are also associated with prosperity and abundance. This practice reflects the integration of spiritual beliefs into everyday life, illustrating how tradition continues to influence contemporary commerce.

The rise of quick e-commerce platforms has led to a sharp decline in sales for kirana stores. Quick commerce platforms like Swiggy and Zomato offer discounted prices and rapid delivery.

Some kirana stores are trying to adapt by embracing digital technologies, using WhatsApp for orders and implementing online billing systems. There are calls for the implementation of a minimum sales price to prevent aggressive discounting by quick commerce platforms.



Spirit of George Town (2023)

Pungent odours burn the back of the throat. They come from street-side stoves that cook dosas, idlis, sambar and spicy bites for the labouring masses of this area. They also seep from sacks of spices thrown down hard on surfaces outside wholesale traders from carts and trucks.

Cycle rickshaws, overloaded cycle carts packed high with boxes or six-metre-long tubes and men with huge, heavy sacks rush by. They all have right of way.

Boxes containing metal pressure valves, fluorescent light tubes, surgical appliances, herbal medicines and TVs. Sacks containing flour, rice, spices and produce. Tubing made of plastic or metal. Tubing for underground cables, electrical machinery and all manner of components and parts for ships, factories and houses.

Shree Grinders, Lakshmi Buildings, Ganesh Traders. The names of gods or symbols denoting greatness adorn the signage in this area. This area of a thousand one-room workshops and trading offices and wholesale merchants, all milling, grinding, beating, buying, selling, importing and exporting.

Textiles wrapped around rolls. Sheets of plastic rolled around tubes. Whole families clung around seats of mopeds. Four or even five to a seat. Sacks of garlic or apples lifted on the back from trucks or cycle carts into premises. Sacks of spices on the hardened dark-skinned backs of tough-looking men.

Neighbourhood centres, marriage halls and Jain and Hindu temples. Apartment blocks, back-lane schools and small hospitals. An area of commerce and hard labour. An area of community… many communities.




TRADING COMPANY


VIVEK AGRO FOODS
PREMIUM MAIDA

Chilli Dog in George Town (2024)

A wholesaler standing outside his store. And don’t forget the small dog taking a nap among the chillis. This image captures key aspects of the city's commercial and architectural heritage.

The rails in the windows enhance ventilation while providing security. Inside, there is a wood-beamed ceiling. Structurally significant, it also contributes to the aesthetics. Clay, wood and laterite stone were often used for such buildings.

Across the city, too many of these buildings have been left to rot or have been replaced with bland, concrete-box-type structures.

George Town, historically known as Black Town during the colonial era, has long been the commercial heart of Chennai. It’s an area steeped in history, with many of its streets and buildings dating back to the 18^{th} and 19^{th} centuries.

Many of these establishments have been passed down through generations, maintaining traditional business practices while adapting to market demands. This continuity provides a sense of stability and authenticity to the area's commercial character.

The large bags of chilli visible outside the store are emblematic of Chennai's role as a major spice trading hub. Spices have been a cornerstone of South Indian commerce for centuries, and Chennai, with its strategic port location, has long been a key player in this trade.

The prominence of chilli, in particular, highlights its significance in South Indian cuisine and culture. While modern supermarkets and online platforms are changing consumer habits, wholesale markets like those in George Town continue to serve an essential function in the supply chain.


அண்டு கோ.,
DHANARAJ
No.37,Anna Pillai Street.,Chennai - 79. Ph : 044


PTC


ATC

Friendship in Triplicane (2024)

A poignant moment of friendship and cultural continuity. Their traditional attire is testament to the enduring presence of Muslim culture in this diverse neighbourhood.

Triplicane is a historical Muslim settlement. The Nawab of Arcot moved here in 1768, and around 20,000 Rowther Muslims settled in Triplicane, making it one of the largest Muslim communities in South India at the time. Today, it is Chennai’s main Muslim area.

The men's head coverings are significant markers of their religious and cultural identity. Throughout Islamic history, head coverings for men have held both practical and symbolic importance. They have been associated with piety, dignity and cultural affiliation.

In many Muslim societies, elders wearing such attire are often viewed with respect as bearers of tradition and wisdom. The walking stick carried by one of the men adds character to the scene, suggesting age and perhaps frailty, but also a sense of dignity and independence.

In certain cultures, elders are traditionally held in high regard, and the walking stick may be seen as a symbol of this status (rather than frailty) as well as a practical aid.

The camaraderie evident between the two men as they exit the tea shop notes the social importance of such establishments in Indian life. Tea or chai shops in neighborhoods like this one in Triplicane often serve as community hubs where people gather to socialise, discuss current events and maintain social bonds.

This image is a reminder of the rich cultural tapestry that makes up India's cities, where different communities have coexisted and influenced each other for generations.



Friendship in George Town (2024)

An unguarded, reflective moment of friendship, oblivious to the camera's presence.

In Indian society, where women often face numerous constraints and cultural expectations, close female friendships in everyday settings like this can serve as crucial sources of emotional support and empowerment (perhaps what can be described as a form of ‘everyday feminism’).

This chai shop on NSC Bose Road (one the branches of the same establishment highlighted on the previous page), near Madras High Court and one of the city’s major bus stations, is usually packed, with even standing room at a premium. The offering includes (sickly sweet) chai, coffee (always in glasses), badam milk, samosas and fried snacks, ice cream, plain cake (in glass jars), biscuits (also in glass jars) and milk shakes.

My requests for black coffee without sugar usually turned a few heads. One of the women asked to taste it. We laughed — she thought it was disgusting!

The road itself is a major thoroughfare and centre for wholesale businesses, including drugs and cosmetics, hardware, stationery, grocery items and is home to what is considered the second biggest bullion market in India.

Different streets branching off NSC Bose Road are known for specific trades. For example, Badrian Street is famous for retail flower trade (more about this later) and Devaraja Mudali Street is known for turmeric and kumkum powder for Hindu rituals.



Duty and Dharma in Triplicane (2024)

He works long hours at the till. “Do you get bored in your job?” He answers, “No, it is my duty.”

Watched over by garlanded images of Hindu deities, this cashier at a local restaurant embodies the notion of dharma, a key concept in Indian philosophy.

At its core, dharma refers to the cosmic order, moral and religious duties, virtuous living and the right way of life. It sustains the universe's order. Integral to the concept is svadharma: personal duty based on position in life, skills and circumstances.

Performing your job diligently, regardless of how mundane it may seem, is part of fulfilling svadharma.

The Bhagavad Gita emphasises the importance of doing one's duty without attachment to the results. This concept suggests that any work done with the right attitude can be a form of spiritual practice.

Dharma also encourages being fully present in the moment. By maintaining awareness and focus on current actions, a worker can find depth and meaning in seemingly repetitive tasks. Many dharmic traditions emphasise the importance of seva (selfless service).

By viewing their work through the lens of dharma, individuals can transform their perception of mundane jobs from boring routines into meaningful practices, providing a sense of contentment and purpose, even in jobs that might otherwise be considered tedious or unexciting.



Random Act of Giving in Triplicane (2023)

He stopped and handed her a small parcel of food.

The concept of giving to the poor in India is deeply rooted in the country's cultural and religious traditions, particularly in Hinduism. Known as dana in Sanskrit, charitable giving is considered an essential part of one's dharma or religious duty. It is viewed not just as a moral obligation but as a spiritual practice that can lead to personal growth and good karma.

One of the most common forms of giving in India is anna dana or food sharing. This practice is so ingrained in the culture that offering food to unexpected guests or those in need is considered a sacred duty.

Many Hindu households and temples regularly distribute food to the poor as part of their daily or weekly rituals. The idea of seva, or selfless service, is closely tied to the concept of giving.

Indians tend to view helping those in need as a way to serve the divine presence in all beings.

In modern India, while traditional forms of giving persist, there has been a rise in organised philanthropy. Numerous NGOs and charitable organisations work to address various social issues, including poverty alleviation.

Religious institutions like temples and mosques also play a significant role in charitable activities, often providing food, education and healthcare to the poor. Despite economic changes that encourage individualism, the cultural emphasis on the collective and giving remains strong, reflecting the enduring influence of these ancient values in Indian society.



The Art of Devotion in Royapetta (2024)

A woman creating an intricate lotus kolam at the entrance of a family home, marking the occasion of a marriage. Weddings and other cultural celebrations hold immense significance and retain their spiritual essence even as society changes. The scene encapsulates a rich tradition deeply rooted in South Indian culture, particularly in Tamil Nadu, where kolams are an integral part of daily life and special celebrations.

Kolam creation is predominantly the preserve of women, passed down through generations as a form of cultural knowledge and artistic expression. This gendered practice reflects the traditional role of women as keepers of the household and bearers of cultural traditions.

The act of creating a kolam is not merely decorative; it is imbued with spiritual significance, believed to bring prosperity, ward off evil and welcome divine energies into the home. The choice of a lotus design for this marriage celebration is particularly meaningful. In Hindu symbolism, the lotus represents purity, beauty, fertility and spiritual awakening. Its use in this context may symbolise the couple's new beginning, their potential for growth and the beauty of their union.

The bowl of chalk in the woman's hand is a testament to the ephemeral nature of kolam art. Unlike permanent decorations, kolams are typically created anew each day or for special occasions, embodying the cyclical nature of life and the impermanence of all things. For many women, the creation of kolams allows them to leave their mark in public space while fulfilling a domestic duty, blurring the lines between private and public spheres.





Kolam Creation



Shrine on Mint Street (2024)

Being lost in the bustle of busy Mint Street, I almost missed this architectural gem. These small street-side shrines, often referred to as wayside shrines, are a common feature in Indian cities and towns. They serve as accessible points of worship for the local population.

For many residents who may not have the time or means to visit larger temples regularly, these shrines provide a convenient way to connect with their faith during their daily routines.

Although the clock may seem a bit out of place to the casual observer, the presence of a priest tending to the splendidly ornate shrine with impressive gatekeepers (who appear to be Jaya and Vijaya) underscores the importance of these small religious spaces.

The vibrancy of the shrine's colours is noteworthy. In Hindu iconography, colours hold significant meaning and are often used to represent different deities or aspects of divinity.

These shrines often become focal points for neighbourhood activities and social interactions. They can serve as centres for community gatherings during festivals or other religious occasions, contributing to the area's sense of shared cultural identity and social cohesion.

The abundance of Hindu shrines and temples in the area indicates just how many people live in the densely packed apartments of Sowcarpet and exemplifies how ancient religious practices continue to thrive in urban India.



School Run on Wall Tax Road (2023)

Wall Tax Road marks the western boundary of Sowcarpet. The tax in the title refers to the tax that the British intended to collect for the construction of a protective wall but never did due to its unpopularity among local residents.

Once home to many cinemas, Wall Tax Road used to be the city’s entertainment hub. The last one closed some years ago. Today, it is home to cheap eateries, travel parcel services (Chennai’s main railway station is close), budget hotels, one-room engineer shops and suchlike. The horrendous traffic and almost permanent dug up stretches of road add to the feeling that it is a street best avoided.

This image highlights the daily routines and responsibilities that women often shoulder. Note that she covers her head with the saree's pallu (loose end), a traditional practice that holds multiple meanings, not least modesty and respect.

This gesture is often seen as a way for women to show deference in public spaces or more conservative settings. It's a visual representation of cultural values and social norms that persist in many parts of rural India and even in some urban areas like Sowcarpet. It is quite rare to see this practice in other parts of the city.

The presence of children's backpacks with cartoon-like characters contrasts with the woman’s traditional attire. However, the backpack also hints at the importance placed on education, given the harsh realities of India, symbolising the aspirations and investments families make in their children's futures.


SRI SAI NAMO YATRA
Tours & Travels
PAW
PATROL

Hard Labour in Triplicane (2024)

End of the workday on a small building site on Triplicane's main thoroughfare on yet another hot and humid day in Chennai.

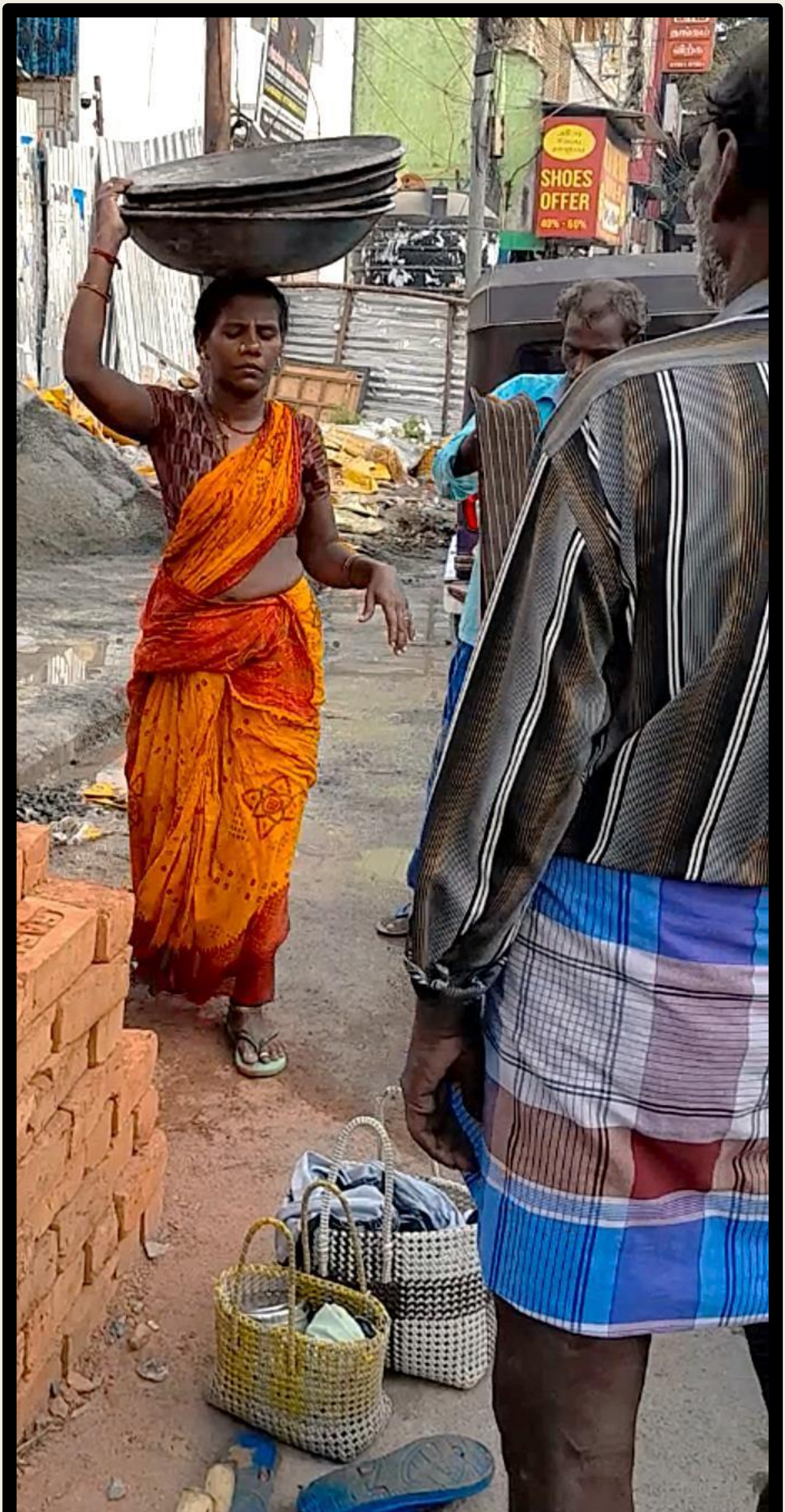
This image encapsulates the economic reality of many women in India. On this site, women earned around 450-500 rupees a day, while the men received 100 rupees more. The foreman received 800 rupees a day. (At the time of writing, 100 rupees = 1 British pound.)

The woman's position in carrying heavy loads while men shovel and mix cement illustrates occupational segregation based on gender. This division often relegates women to lower-paying, more strenuous jobs.

The visual contrast of her saree against the backdrop of a construction site emphasises the interplay between cultural traditions and economic necessity, showcasing how women navigate their identities in the labour force.

Moreover, the image speaks to the precarious nature of work in the informal labour sector, where workers often lack job security, benefits and legal protections. The presence of families moving from site to site reflects the challenges they face in maintaining stability while seeking better economic opportunities. With no childcare available, toddlers sometimes play in the dirt as their mothers toil.

This image encapsulates the resilience of women workers while shedding light on some of the systemic challenges they face in achieving economic equality in their labour.


SHOES
OFFER


Coromandel KING


வாடகை

Working Poor on Mint Street (2023)

This is an image taken on Mint Street at an intersection. The men wait patiently for the congestion to clear up ahead. Produce arrives at wholesalers in the area by truck. Hand-pulled carts, cycle carts and bullock-powered carts, like the one in this image, then distribute the produce further afield. The man on the right is a cycle rickshaw driver (now vanished from most areas of Chennai). He transports people, sometimes goods.

As with the construction worker in the previous image and the other images in this book of rag pickers and manual labourers lifting, hauling and pulling, these images show the working poor who toil to build India, to transport India and to recycle India and to help feed India by ensuring food gets from field to wholesaler to store to plate.

The men in this image also belong to the non-unionised, informal sector that affords no legal labour right protections. This includes the absence of minimum wage guarantees, health and safety regulations and social security benefits such as pensions or unemployment insurance. They face risks such as unsafe working conditions, lower wages, arbitrary dismissals and exploitation without any recourse.

It is worth noting that, as of 2022-23, the top 1 per cent of Indians control 22.6 per cent of national income and 40.1 per cent of total wealth. This concentration is among the highest globally. In contrast, the bottom 50 per cent possess only 3 per cent of the total wealth. It is therefore unsurprising that, today, around 814 million of the country's 1.4 billion people receive free food from the state. They are designated the most vulnerable sections of society.



Autorickshaw Driver in Royapetta (2023)

He is part of a group of autorickshaw drivers who were chatting next to their vehicles.

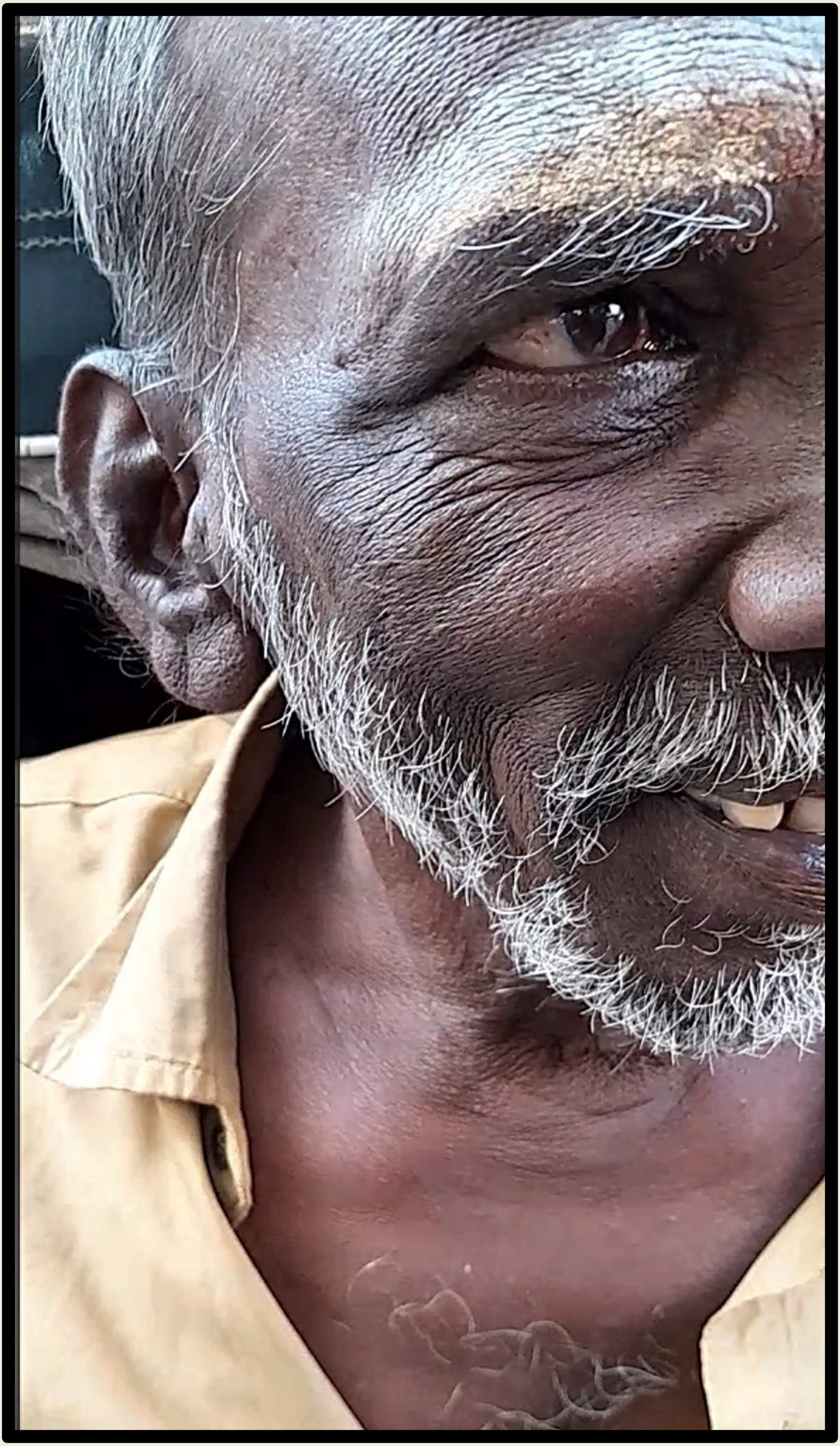
Although often maligned by many Chennaites for their attempts to overcharge, autorickshaw drivers are an integral part of the city’s social fabric and belong to the informal sector. They typically do not have formal employment contracts or job security. Many are self-employed or work on a commission basis, which means they bear the financial risks associated with their work without any legal protections or benefits.

These drivers (numbering tens of thousands) play a crucial role in Chennai's economy and transport. They provide reasonably affordable city-wide mobility, making it accessible to a broad segment of the population.

For many drivers, this profession is not just a job but a means of supporting entire families, often spanning generations. The detailed portrayal of the driver's face compels the observer to see beyond the vehicle and recognise the individual behind the wheel, complete with his unique experiences and struggles. Each line and crevice on the driver's face tells a story of countless journeys through the streets of Chennai.

While currently ubiquitous, the auto sector may diminish with changing transport trends, especially due to the expanding rail metro system that seems to have taken business away from autorickshaw drivers.

The image encapsulates the essence of Chennai's working class, highlighting the often-unsung heroes of daily life, capturing a moment in time that tells a tale in itself.



A Family Affair in George Town (2024)

This streetside fruit and vegetable market stretches along one side of a busy thoroughfare in George Town, near Madras High Court. Shoppers peruse the produce as they walk in the road, negotiating the many autorickshaws that wait for their custom.

These types of markets have been an integral part of Indian society for centuries, serving not just as commercial spaces but as social hubs where people gather, interact and exchange information. The workers here are part of the country’s significant informal sector (more than 90 per cent of the labour force), and such markets provide livelihood opportunities for many small-scale vendors and their family members.

The urban planning and infrastructure of Indian cities have also played a role. Cities like Chennai have grown organically, with less rigid urban planning compared to Western cities. This has allowed street markets to develop and thrive in various neighbourhoods.

Street markets often provide a direct connection between rural producers and urban consumers, especially for fresh produce. This farm-to-table model is deeply ingrained in Indian food culture and contributes to the continued importance of these markets.

While organised retail is growing in India, amid much concern for the livelihoods of people who make a living in these markets, its penetration is still lower compared to Western countries. This leaves more space for traditional markets to thrive.

The result is a vibrant, dynamic market culture that remains an essential part of Chennai's economic and social fabric.


ஜாஸ் டிரேடர்ஸ்
AS TRADERS
House Keeping Items Wholesale & Retail
No.184, N.S.C. Bose Road, Chennai - 600 001.
WHOLE SALE


SRI VEERA'S


SIVA SHREE TRADERS
ALL VARIETIES OF APPALAM, VADAMS, FRYUMS ETC

Flower Power in George Town (2023)

She works in this busy flower market in George Town in the traditional heart of Chennai, on Badrian Street, historically a major hub for wholesale flower vendors.

Although many vendors have been relocated to the Koyambedu area of the city, some still operate here, and the street remains a major retail outlet for flowers. The flower bazaar occupies just a single vegetation-strewn lane but is a hive of activity

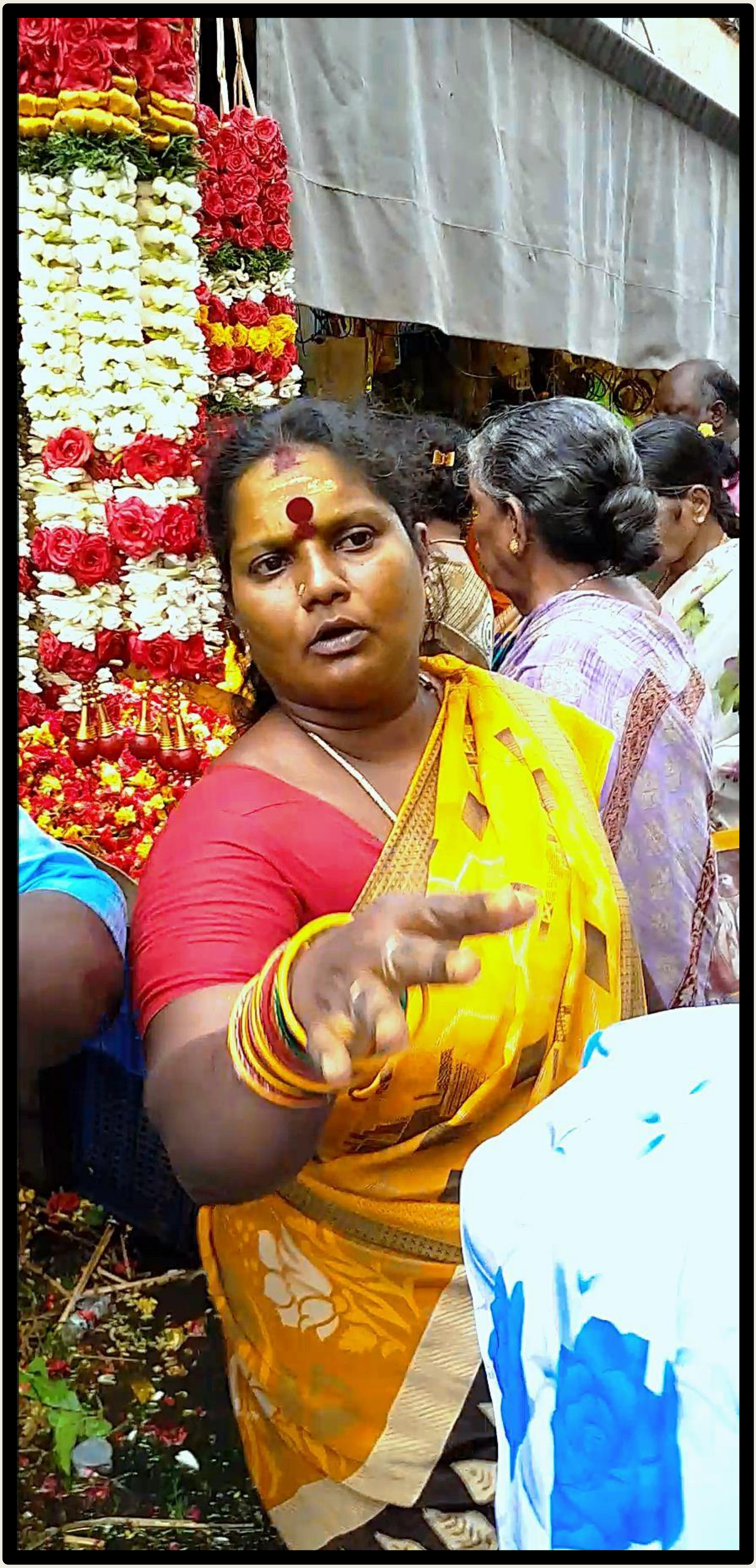
The flower garlands behind her hold a significant place in Indian culture. Garlands are integral to religious practices, social ceremonies and expressions of hospitality. Flower garlands are commonly used in Hindu worship rituals, known as ‘puja’. They are presented to deities in temples and home shrines as a gesture of honour and devotion.

Each flower has its own significance. For example, marigolds symbolise auspiciousness; jasmine represents purity.

Garlands are symbols of respect and hospitality. It is customary to greet guests or dignitaries with a flower garland, signifying warmth and welcome. This tradition is particularly evident during weddings, where the exchange of garlands between the bride and groom marks the beginning of their marital journey. An act that symbolises mutual respect and the merging of two families.

Flower garlands also adorn homes during festivals and special occasions. In everyday life, they can be offered to friends or family members embarking on journeys as a token of good luck.

The craftsmanship involved in making these garlands is an art form, and many women sit in this lane all day threading petals to create impressive decorations.



Gulab Jamun in George Town (2023)

Gulab jamun is a beloved Indian sweet known for its rich, syrupy flavour and melt-in-the-mouth texture. Originating from the Indian subcontinent, this dessert is made primarily from milk solids, traditionally khoya, which is deep-fried and then soaked in a fragrant sugar syrup infused with rose water.

The name ‘gulab jamun’ translates to ‘rose water berry’, reflecting its aromatic qualities and shape akin to the jamun fruit, a type of black plum. The sweet holds a special place in Indian culture, often featured at celebrations such as weddings, festivals like Diwali and Eid and family gatherings. It’s a staple in both festive and everyday contexts.

The close-up image of a street vendor with gulab jamun next to him captures not just the essence of this delectable treat but also the vibrant street food culture prevalent in India.

Western and India brand chocolate bars and sweets can easily be bought in the country, but Indian sweets have their own unique place in the country’s culture.

Other traditional sweets include jalebi, a spiral-shaped, crispy sweets soaked in sugar syrup; rasgulla, soft, spongy cheese balls in syrup; barfi, fudge-like sweets made from condensed milk, often flavoured with nuts; and ladoo, round sweets made from various flours and ingredients, like besan or semolina.

There is also kheer, rice pudding cooked with milk and sugar, often garnished with nuts; Mysore pak, a rich dessert made from chickpea flour and ghee; and gajar halwa, a carrot-based dessert cooked with milk and sugar.





Into the Night on Mint Street (2023)

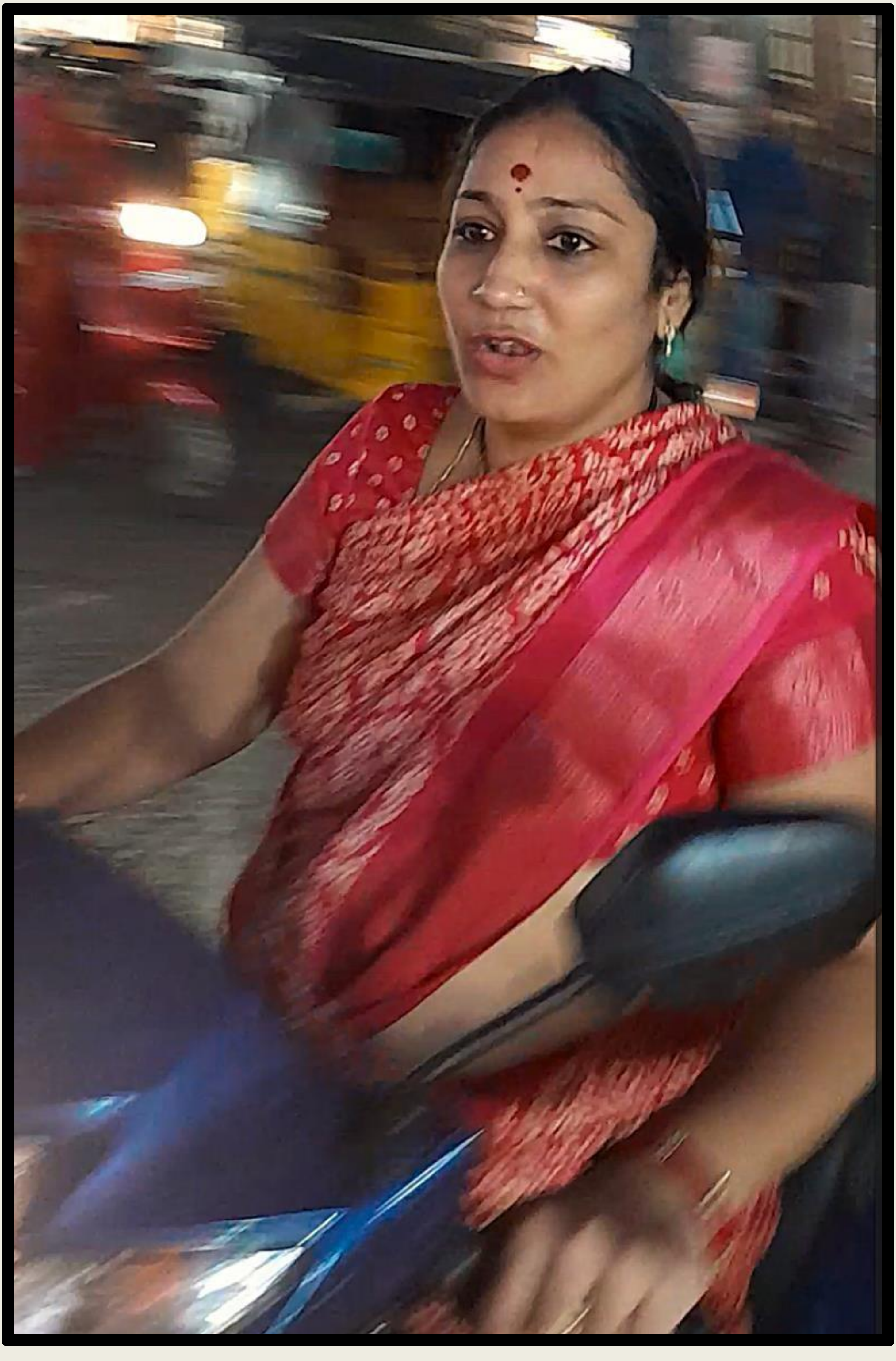
The type of image that cannot be planned for. It captures a split second when the camera video just happened to be pointing in the right direction at the right time.

The woman's red saree and bindi are potent symbols of Indian tradition, deeply rooted in cultural and religious significance. Red is often associated with marriage and auspiciousness and represents love, commitment and prosperity. The bindi, a mark on the forehead, carries multiple meanings, including spiritual wisdom, marital status and a connection to divine consciousness.

In stark contrast to these traditional elements, the woman is depicted in motion on a motor scooter, symbolising women’s increasing physical and social mobility, independence and the changing dynamics of urban life. The image is a visual metaphor for the societal changes occurring in India.

The motion blur of the woman's body, contrasted with the sharp focus on her face, artistically represents the swift pace of cultural evolution and the individual's journey through these changes.

The image serves as a commentary on cultural continuity amid change. It suggests that embracing modernity involves finding ways to integrate both into a new, evolving identity. The woman's confident posture and forward motion imply progress and empowerment, while embracing a continued connection to cultural roots.



Flat Out in George Town (2024)

This image captures a moment of rest and exhaustion for a working-class couple. The scene of a husband and wife taking respite in the back of a cycle cart speaks volumes about the daily struggles and realities faced by many urban poor in India's bustling cities.

The man lying flat out and the woman sitting with closed eyes, head resting in her hand (seemingly almost at the end of her tether), vividly illustrate the physical toll of their labour-intensive lives. This snapshot likely represents a brief interlude in their workday.

The cycle cart itself is emblematic of the informal economy that sustains many millions in India's cities and, in this case, is used for transporting goods around the George Town area in the humidity and blistering heat.

The shared moment of vulnerability between husband and wife hints at the partnership often required for survival among working-class families. Moreover, the image blurs the line between public and private spheres. For many urban poor, public spaces become extensions of their homes due to limited living quarters. This scene of intimate rest occurring in a public setting is not uncommon.

The evocative image serves as a window into the daily realities of urban life in India, highlighting both the hardships faced by many and the human moments of connection and respite that occur within those struggles.



Down a Back Lane in Sowcarpet (2024)

Two women of North Indian ancestry chatting happily in a back lane of Sowcarpet. This image encapsulates the essence of Sowcarpet's distinct character as a North Indian enclave within the predominantly South Indian city.

This image speaks to the multicultural fabric of Sowcarpet. The area is known for its diverse mix of communities, including Marwaris, Gujaratis and Jains, alongside the local Tamil population.

Sowcarpet, often referred to as ‘Little North India’ in Chennai, has a rich history of North Indian migration, particularly from states like Rajasthan, Gujarat and Bihar. The presence of these women in their traditional attire represents the preservation of cultural identity among migrant communities, even generations after their initial settlement.

The back lanes of Sowcarpet are more than just narrow passageways; they are the lifeblood of the community, where daily life unfolds in its most authentic form. These lanes with their one-room shops, grain millers, fruit and veg markets and schools are neighbourhoods within neighbourhoods, fostering a sense of intimacy and belonging among residents.

The narrow back lanes encourage conviviality and face-to face interaction, an informal grapevine where information is passed on and friendships are reinforced. These interactions play a largely positive role in binding communities together.

The colourful clothing contributes to the vibrant atmosphere of Sowcarpet, creating a stark contrast to the more subdued dress typically seen in other parts of Chennai.





Lanes of Sowcarpet


SAPNA
TRADING

Ganesh Chaturthi Festival (2023)

The procession of the large, colourful Ganesh effigy on a truck through the streets of Chennai represents a crucial part of the Ganesh Chaturthi festivities. This parade, known as the Ganesh Visarjan or immersion procession, typically marks the culmination of the 10-day festival.

The presence of dozens of people accompanying the truck highlights the communal nature of this celebration. Ganesh Chaturthi is not just a religious observance but also a social event that brings people together, fostering a sense of unity and shared cultural identity.

On this particular day, more than a hundred Ganesh effigies were slowly paraded down this Street in Triplicane from temples throughout the city.

The journey of the Ganesh idol towards the sea is deeply symbolic. It represents the cycle of creation and dissolution in Hindu philosophy. The immersion of the idol in the Bay of Bengal, in this case, signifies Lord Ganesha's return to his celestial abode, taking with him the misfortunes of his devotees.

The use of an everyday truck to transport the deity shows how ancient customs adapt to urban settings. Some men dance to music as they follow the trucks and women often join in too. A blend of religious fervour, community spirit and cultural pride.

There was a significant police presence, reflecting the potential for heightened tensions in Triplicane, the city’s main Muslim area; often arising when alcohol and fervency intersect.


சிட்டி


JEW
IAMOND



Police Presence

Sri Parthasarathy Swami Temple (2024)

This image captures a moment in the daily lives and rituals of Hindu priests at the Sri Parthasarathy Swami Temple in Triplicane.

It is one of the oldest temples in the city, originally built by the Pallava kings between the 6th and 8th centuries and later expanded by the Cholas and Vijayanagara kings. The temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu and is a significant pilgrimage site for devotees of Vaishnavism.

The bare-chested appearance of the priests is traditional for Brahmin priests in South Indian temples, especially during rituals or while inside the temple premises. This attire symbolises purity and humility before the temple deity.

The Vishnu tilak on their foreheads, typically consisting of two vertical lines forming a U-shape, is a distinctive mark of Vaishnava devotees. This tilak, known as Urdhva Pundra, represents the feet of Lord Vishnu and signifies the priests' dedication to Vishnu worship.

The thread passing over their shoulders, known as Yajnopavita or sacred thread, is a symbol of spiritual initiation and marks them as twice-born (Dvija) in the Hindu tradition. This thread is typically worn by Brahmins and other upper castes, signifying their commitment to spiritual knowledge and duties.

The name Triplicane comes from ‘Thiru-Alli-Keni, meaning ‘Sacred Lily Pond’, referring to the pond in front of the Parthasarathy temple. The name 'Parthasarathy' means ‘the charioteer of

Arjuna’, referring to Lord Krishna's role as the charioteer for Arjuna in the epic Mahabharata. The main deity of the temple is Vishnu in the form of Parthasarathy (Krishna as Arjuna's charioteer).



North Indian Women in Sowcarpet (2024)

A group of North Indian women down a Sowcarpet back lane, indicating that Sowcarpet rocks… to a constant, intense and very different beat from the rest of Chennai.

Sowcarpet is a world of mud, dust, cycle carts and cycle rickshaws, hard manual labour, wandering cattle and dogs, paler faces from North India and Hindi and Gujarati scripts on signs.

The area is Rajasthan by the sea, Gujarat on the Coromandel Coast. It’s where Marwaris (an ethnic group from those two states), many of them moneylenders and traders, migrated to during the 20th century and before. (Mint Street, the area’s central thoroughfare, derived its name from having housed the East India Company’s mint.)

Here, different parts of India have come together to produce a uniquely Tamilian cocktail with intriguing Gujarati and Rajasthani aftertastes.

North Indians settled in Sowcarpet as the area provided access to key economic and social networks. The area, being near to the port, has long been a hive of commercial activity.

New migrants often found assistance through existing networks within the community, such as dharamsalas (public resthouses), which offered affordable accommodation and food. This support system facilitated easier integration into the local economy.

The presence of established North Indian traders has provided a supportive environment for newcomers seeking economic opportunities in textiles, electronics and food services.


भाव में मिलेगी .
LUNCH TIME : 2pm to 4pm

Stretchability in Sowcarpet (2022)

An everyday scene from Sowcarpet. A side street that leads on to Mint Street. It could be a village scene from North India. Two women of North Indian ancestry in nine yards of non-stretchable material wrapped around the body with only the face visible.

They could be from the 1960s or some other decade. Aside from the fashionable handbag, the giveaway that this is Chennai in 2022 is the ubiquitous cell phone pressed to the side of the head.

To those from foreign shores, she might look a bit out of time and out of place. The same could be said of Sowcarpet itself. But the people here and the area are very much in time, in tune and in place.

Custom, tradition and regional and personal identity are so deeply intertwined. As intertwined as the hive of one-room workshops and businesses in the area. As intertwined as the back lanes themselves and the stretchability of time and place that transcends the decades.

This image especially stands out because of the remarkable colours that contrast with the more subdued clothing seen in other areas of the city. This may be partly due to the presence of Marwaris and Gujaratis in Sowcarpet, who traditionally embrace vibrant colours in their attire, a striking marker of cultural identity. The area also hosts numerous designer retailers that focus on unique, vibrant designs. Their presence contributes to the eye-catching offerings available.

The combination of cultural richness, diverse styles, designer presence and competitive market dynamics makes Sowcarpet a hub for colourful textiles.



Worker on Mint Street (2023)

The part of the street where he stands is packed with metalware shops, many of which supply equipment for household and industrial kitchens.

Thousands of meals to be prepared on the stoves and in the pots and pans bought here. Millions of bellies to be filled with the holy trinity of Tamil culinary delight: idli, dosa and sambar.

These workers, who may probably work into their late-60s, typically earn low wages and lack job security. They often work long hours in hot and humid conditions, which can lead to health issues such as dehydration and exhaustion.

The physical demands of the job can result in injuries, yet these workers tend not to have access to adequate healthcare or support systems to address such issues.

Additionally, many of these workers come from marginalised communities, which further exacerbates their challenges due to systemic inequalities.

They belong to the informal sector, which includes street vendors, home-based producers, small-scale artisans who operate independently, casual labourers in the likes of construction, agriculture and domestic workers and waste pickers. They comprise around 80 per cent of the urban labour force.

Informal workers typically encounter issues like underemployment — working fewer hours than desired or receiving inadequate pay — alongside the absence of legal protections against exploitation.


Osring


SUBHAM TRA
Wholesale Dealers in Kirana & Generals
PRAVEEN KUMAR & CO
GT INDIA PVT LTD



Apartment Block in Sowcarpet (2024)

People in Sowcarpet reside in a sea of small apartment blocks, which seem to go on never-ending into the distance, whichever way you look. They sprawled sideways and upwards to accommodate migrants from North India, many of whom had larger families than the original Tamil inhabitants of the area.

The fact that their neighbours from towns and villages up in Gujarat, Rajasthan and elsewhere often followed didn't help matters.

Sowcarpet loosely translates as moneylender or pawnbroker. Such businesspeople formed part of the original North Indian population who came here.

But appearances can be deceptive: there is wealth in this area. Moneylenders do not remain poor. Neither do wholesale traders or the many jewellers located here. The quality of some of the apartment blocks, the facades at least, indicate a certain degree of wealth remains in the area. The well-off continue to reside in these types of areas throughout India because they rely on the local community, its social capital and the associated networks to do business.

Back in the 1700s, Telegu speaking people migrated to Mint Street. People from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other states eventually came too. This eclectic mix has helped make Sowcarpet what it is today. In some respects, it has helped it to keep ahead of the game. Not in terms of decent urban planning, prettiness or cleanliness, but certainly in terms of heart, soul and vibrancy.


RATAN LAXMI

Sacred & Mundane in George Town (2024)

In the bustling George Town area of Chennai, a colourful streetside temple emerges as a striking focal point amid the functional box-type apartments that characterise the neighbourhood.

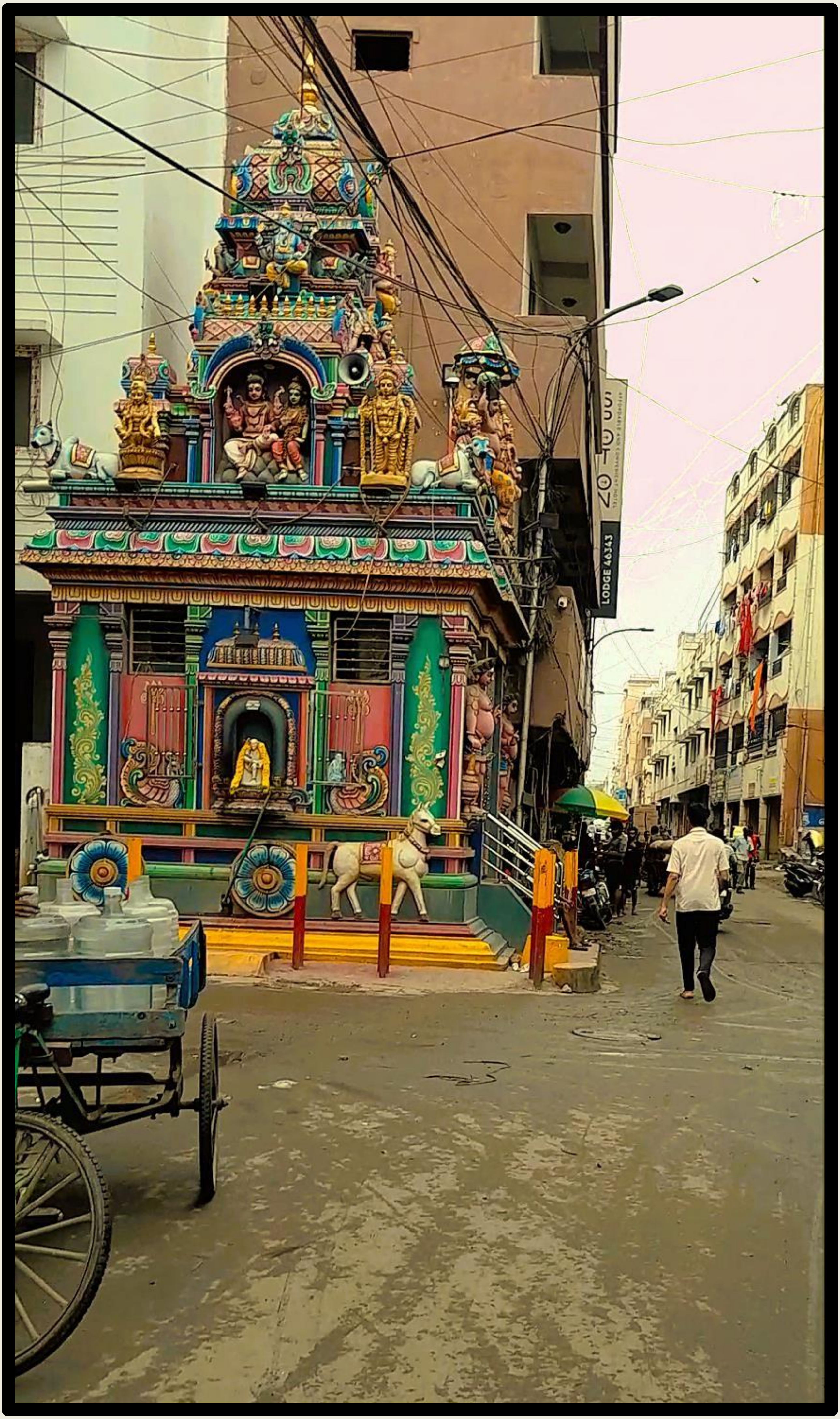
This vibrant structure stands in sharp contrast to the surrounding utilitarian architecture, highlighting the rich tapestry of Chennai's urban landscape. The temple, with its ornate carvings and bright hues, serves as a testament to traditional Tamil architecture and religious practices, while the nearby apartments reflect a more contemporary, practical approach to urban living.

This juxtaposition not only emphasises the coexistence of old and new but also underscores the significance of spirituality in daily life, even in a densely populated urban environment.

The vibrant streetside temple (or shrine) is not merely an architectural curiosity but a significant representation of tradition, community and spirituality.

Temple architecture in Tamil Nadu is a remarkable testament to the region's rich cultural heritage and artistic brilliance, featuring around 33,000 ancient temples that date back over two millennia.

Characterised by the Dravidian style, larger temples showcase distinctive elements such as towering gopurams (gateway towers), pyramid-shaped vimanas (sanctum towers), intricately sculpted pillared mandapas (halls) and sacred tanks that symbolise purification. Each temple serves as a vibrant centre of worship and community life, reflecting the spiritual devotion of the Tamil people.


LODGE 46343


விநாயகர்
ஆலயம்


TN.12
K.5000

Lost in Time in Thousand Lights (2024)

An elderly Hindu priest with shopping bags walks through the Thousand Lights area of Chennai. An image that represents tradition and stability in an area largely defined by change and gentrification.

His appearance in this transforming neighbourhood serves as a living link to the area's past, a reminder of the deep-rooted spiritual traditions that have long been integral to the city's identity.

The Thousand Lights area, once characterised by low-rise buildings and community-oriented spaces, is now giving way to gentrification with high-rise offices, hotels and apartments.

Behind the statistics of economic growth and real estate developments are individuals and communities navigating significant cultural and social transitions. This scene encapsulates the complex reality of urban transformation in Chennai, where the traditional and the modern coexist in a compelling balance.

The name ‘Thousand Lights’ derives from a tradition associated with the Thousand Lights Mosque, which was built in 1810. The mosque was illuminated with a thousand oil lamps to light up its assembly hall.

The mosque is a major cultural and religious landmark in Chennai, reflecting the rich heritage of the area and its historical ties to the Nawab of Arcot, who played a key role in its establishment.


சுரங்க நடைபாதை
SUBWAY

Architectural Gem in Royapetta (2024)

A fine example of a well-maintained traditionally designed building. Unfortunately, such examples are becoming few and far between.

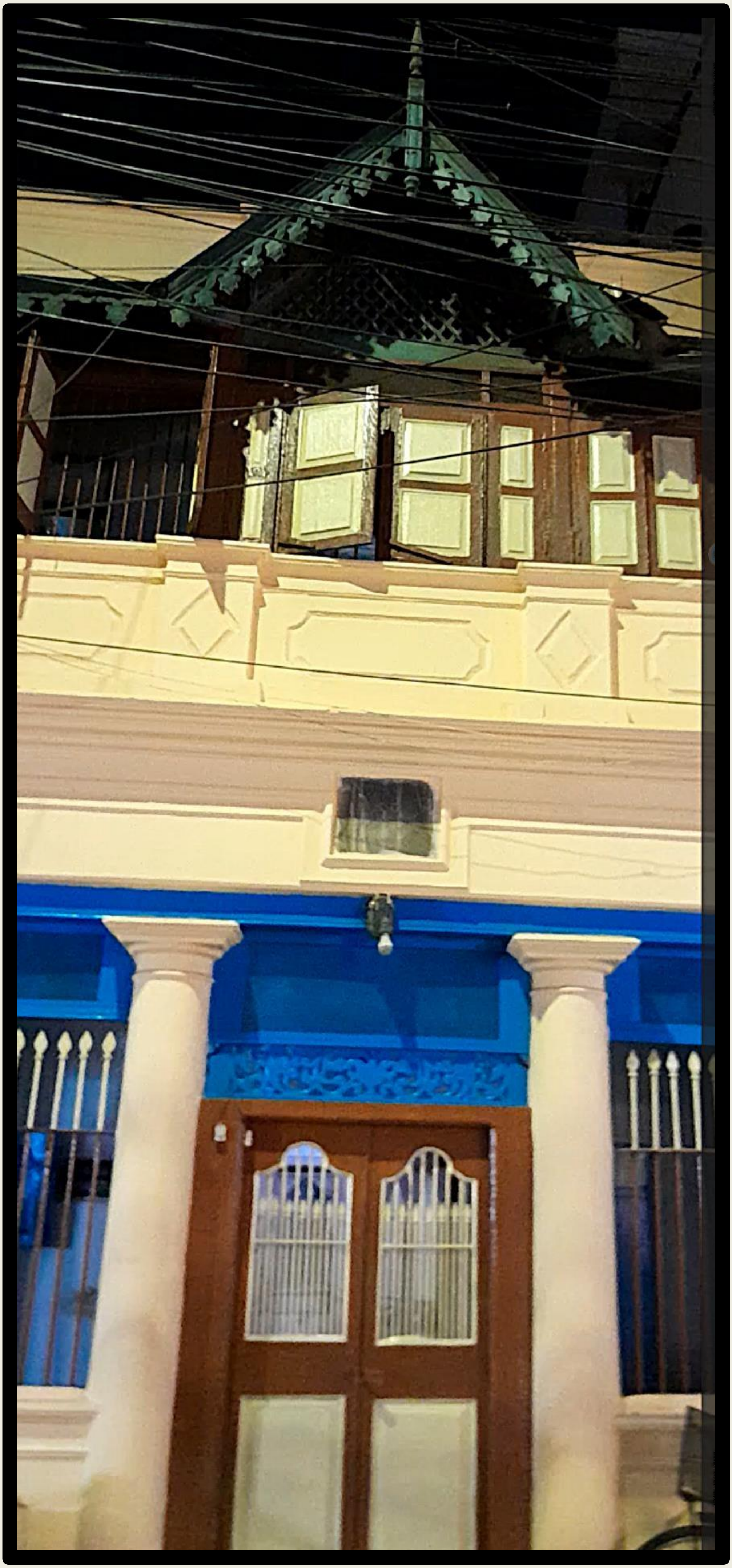
The neglect of traditional everyday buildings in Chennai reflects a broader trend of urban development that often prioritises modernity over heritage. Many of these structures, which once formed the backbone of the city's architectural identity, are now facing deterioration or have been demolished.

Rapid urbanisation has led to a surge in real estate development, often at the expense of older neighbourhoods and their traditional buildings. Many everyday structures are being replaced by high-rise apartments and steel and glass commercial complexes. This shift not only alters the skyline but also erases the cultural and historical context that these buildings represent.

At the same time, many traditional buildings suffer from a lack of maintenance and care. Roofs leak, walls crumble and architectural details fade away. This neglect can lead to significant structural issues over time, making restoration increasingly difficult and costly.

The changing lifestyles and preferences of residents also contribute to the neglect of traditional buildings. Younger generations may prefer modern amenities and designs, leading to a disinterest in maintaining older structures.

This shift can result in a loss of community identity as neighbourhoods transform to accommodate contemporary tastes.



The Balloon Goes up in Triplicane (2024)

In the Triplicane area of Chennai, a street hawker, selling large, transparent balloons with messages of love and happiness, stands among throngs of people celebrating the end of Eid. The balloons evoke a sense of joy and innocence.

The atmosphere here, in the city’s main Muslim area, is electric. His balloons remind everyone of the simple pleasures that accompany significant cultural events.

Despite their importance, street hawkers face numerous challenges. The Greater Chennai Corporation has been working on designating specific vending zones to regulate street vending and improve conditions for both vendors and customers. This is something we see happening across the globe.

However, like elsewhere, this initiative has sparked concerns among hawkers who fear losing their established customer bases if relocated. Many have been operating in their neighbourhoods for years, creating a loyal clientele that may not follow them to new locations.

The recent push for organised vending zones supposedly aims to address issues such as traffic congestion and pedestrian safety while ensuring that street vendors can operate legally and hygienically. Again, an argument used in many countries to clear out street hawkers and vendors from certain public spaces.

Many hawkers express anxiety about being pushed out of their traditional selling spots, which could jeopardise their businesses and disrupt longstanding community dynamics.


My VKC
My Store
LOVE

God is Present in George Town (2024)

The image of a labourer taking a rest against the backdrop of large sacks of produce and colourful shrine encapsulates the dynamic interplay between labour, culture and spirituality in urban life.

The labourer represents the backbone of the city's economy — those who toil to bring fresh produce to markets and homes.

His presence highlights the importance of manual labour in sustaining local businesses and communities. Hard work is balanced by moments of rest and sometimes reverence. Turn down any street or back lane in this neighbourhood and there is a temple or shrine.

The large sacks of produce serve as a reminder of the agricultural roots that continue to nourish urban populations, even as cities like Chennai expand and eat up valuable agricultural land.

Accelerated urban expansion like we see in India is a problem as far as food security is concerned: around 60 per cent of the world’s cropland lies on the outskirts of cities and tends to be on average twice as productive as land elsewhere.

In contrast to the labourer's hard work, the shrine, rich in symbolism and iconography that prominently features deities in various forms (human, animal, hybrid), with each embodying a distinct aspect of the divine, signifies the spiritual and communal dimension of life in Chennai.

A deep connection to the spiritual remains vital to communal and personal identity in the city.


SSA

Under Cover on Mint Street (2022)

A fleeting split-second caught on Mint Street. Another serendipitous moment as she walked into shot at the right time. This scene is rich with symbolism and contrasts that speak to Chennai's unique character and ongoing evolution.

The woman's appearance, particularly her saree worn over her head, is noteworthy as it's not a common sight in most parts of the city. This style of draping is often associated with more conservative or traditional ways.

The expensive-looking saree with embroidered leaf motifs adds another layer of meaning to the image. The quality of her attire indicates a certain level of affluence, while the leaf may carry a rich, symbolic meaning. Leaves are often used in various forms, from decorative elements in temple architecture to intricate designs in textiles and paintings.

Different leaves mean different things and artists use these motifs to convey deeper meanings about life cycles, spirituality and human emotions, making them integral to the cultural fabric of Hindu art.

For example, Bel leaves are considered sacred in Hinduism, particularly associated with Lord Shiva. They are offered during worship to please the deity. Mango leaves are commonly used to decorate entrances during festivals and weddings, believed to invite positive energy and prosperity into homes.

The woman's presence on Mint Street, with her blend of traditional attire and confident demeanour, serves as a metaphor for Chennai itself. A city where the past and present, tradition and progress, continually intersect and reshape one another.



Time and Motion on Mint Street (2023)

This unplanned image captures a fascinating juxtaposition of motion and stillness, blurriness and clarity, which speaks volumes about the nature of urban life and our perception of time and space.

The blurred man on the scooter represents the constant flow of movement and transience in city life. His lack of visual definition symbolises the fleeting nature of encounters in urban spaces, where people are often in transit, passing by each other without truly connecting. The blur also evokes a sense of urgency and the rapid pace of contemporary living, where individuals are constantly rushing from one place to another.

In stark contrast, the woman in focus in the background represents a moment of stillness amid the chaos of Mint Street.
Her clarity in the image suggests a sense of presence and immediacy. However, her absorption in the digital world of her phone ironically disconnects her from the physical environment around her, creating a different kind of 'blur', one of attention and awareness.

We often find ourselves 'blurred' in our physical movements while remaining mentally 'focused' on digital interactions or internal thoughts. The image highlights how our perception of time and space can vary depending on our state of motion or stillness.

The unplanned nature of this shot adds to its significance, as it authentically captures a moment of urban reality. It reminds us that amid the blur of daily life, there are always moments of clarity and stillness if we pay attention.


APR
TRANSPORT

Bonus Shots

Time to let some images speak for themselves…

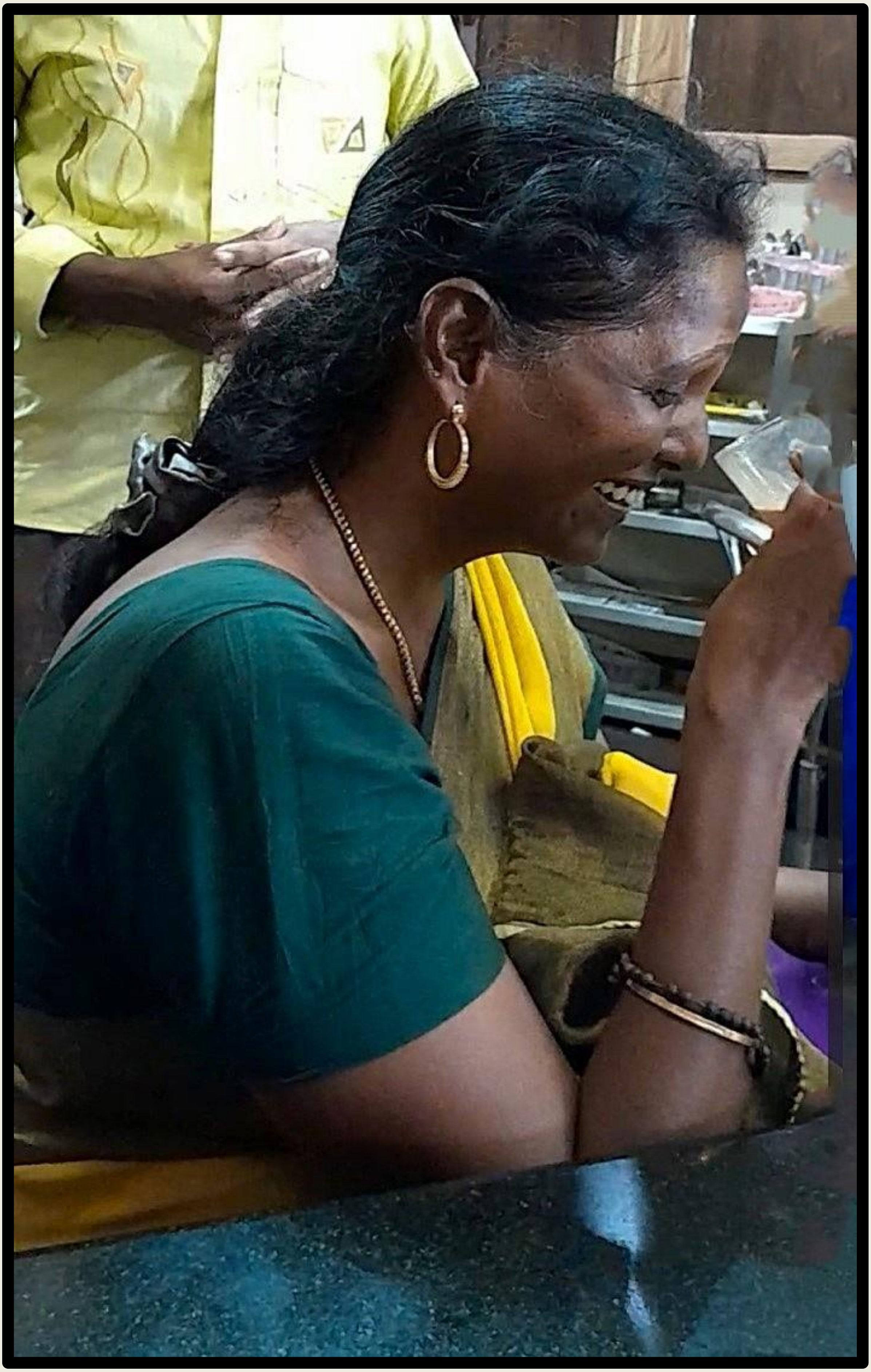
starting with

Local Flower Bazaar in Triplicane (2023)





Rag Picker in Triplicane (2024)



Friendship in a George Town Chai Shop (2024)



Bare Feet on Extremely Hot Surface (2024)



Side Street off Mint Street (2022)



Mother Talking on a Cell Phone on Mint Street (2022)



Mint Street (2022)



Mobile Workers on Wall Tax Road (2022)



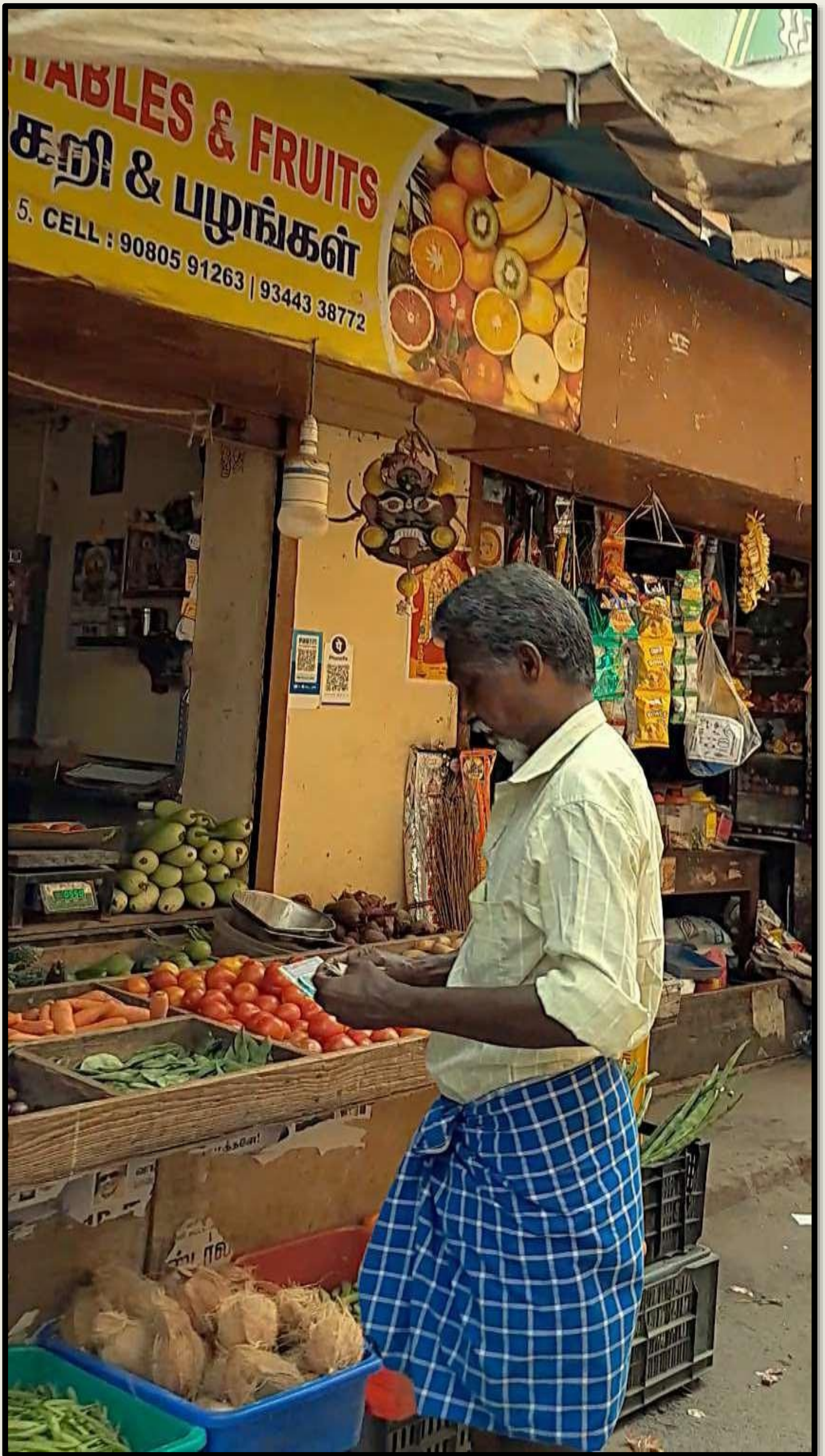
Mint Street (2024)



Temple Down a Sowcarpet Lane (2022)



Gods in Triplicane (2024)



Triplicane Back Street (2023)



George Town (2024)



Small Retail in Sowcarpet (2023)



George Town (2023)



Temple Time in Triplicane (2024)